

*Mirage of Blaze volume 5: Dragon God of the  
Spiritual Heartland*

*Kuwabara Mizuna*

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## Prologue

The attacking army had already pushed into the land around Samegao Castle .

Had they set fire to the eastern side of the Third Wing? Flames and smoke soared brilliantly into the sky as if the entire mountain were ablaze.

The battle had already begun. Horie Munechika , master of Samegao Castle , had gone over to Kagekatsu's side. Perhaps Horie had succumbed to fear

of the massive army Kagekatsu had sent after him after he escaped from the Otate at Naoe Port in the Echigo capital. In the end Horie had betrayed him and surrendered the castle, and was even now attacking with the advancing army.

Even so, the soldiers he had led here from the Otate seemed determined to make a stand. Seven days since the surrender of the Otate .

In this, their last resistance, they could not hope to match the numbers of the enormous army which had descended on them from Kasugayama , the Uesugi primary fortress.

The sound of soldiers'angry voices was audible in the distance.

Fire engulfed the surrounding land, burning brightly.

(Is the end already upon me...?)

The hopeless murmur slipped from his lips as he stood looking down at

the spots of rising smoke from the main citadel. Despair and an unshakeable determination roiled within his chest.

In this past year since his adopted father, the great Uesugi Kenshin , had passed away, the battle for succession of the Uesugi Clan between himself and Kagekatsu, likewise Kenshin's adopted son, had divided the various commanders and served only to plunge Echigo into the chaos of war. This land of Echigo , which their enemies had never even been able to set foot on while

Kenshin was alive, was now stained by the blood of their brethren.

Though Kitajou and Honjou had secured the might of the various generals of central Echigo , in the end they had been unable to overcome Kagekatsu. Houjou reinforcements from his family home at Odawara Castle could only retreat before Kagekatsu's fierce offense. Takeda Katsuyori , who had also sent reinforcements, had double-crossed them and gone over to Kagekatsu. The Otate , which he had made his stronghold, had fallen to Kagekatsu's general

offensive on March 17th in the raging flames that engulfed the capital.

Kagekatsu's soldiers had taken his son, Doumanmaru , and the former Kanrei , Uesugi Norimasa , on their way to Kasugayama to negotiate for peace, and put them to the sword.

No place of refuge remained to him in this land of Echigo ...

Now the only path left to him was to escape from Echigo and return to his birth-home, to Ujimasa and his other brothers—to Odawara.

(But I can no longer outrun them...)

Samegao Castle was strategically placed on the Shinetsu border. Horie,

the master of this castle, had been a trusted ally. He had fled [Echigo](#) only to be betrayed at the very last. The [Echigo](#) border was just beyond the castle. He would probably be able to throw

off his pursuers if he could cross over the mountains. But Kagekatsu's massive army had already completely surrounded the castle and reduced the land around it to ashes.

"Lord Kagekatsu!"

He turned to the man shouting his name so desperately: his close aide, Ishizaka Sakon.

"Please run! This castle hath fallen! Please escape from here, even if it be thee alone!"

"..."

"Lord Kagekatsu!"

He could run no longer.

Kagekatsu would not allow him to escape from [Echigo](#) with his life. Surely, until Kagekatsu had his head...

(Kagekatsu...)

Perhaps everything, even hatred, had withered within him; even the sound of his name touched only emptiness within him.

He cast his gaze across the [Echigo](#) plains. He could see a small light in the distant north—the light of the lands around [Kasugayama](#) ?

He closed his eyes tightly.

Quietly pulled out the dagger at his waist.

(Father...)

He embraced the beautiful, sublime vision, seeing the figure of that righteous warrior thundering across the battlefield.

Kenshin, his beloved adopted father, whom he had revered above any other.

This past year, he had silently asked, again and again, repeatedly, endlessly—

Was this right?

Had it been the right thing to do?

Within his heart, his awe-inspiring father had only watched over him, saying nothing. How many times had he pondered, questioned the meaning

of his existence? He, who had arrived in this land after such a long struggle—what was the meaning of his life in this ever-changing

Sengoku? He felt as if his existence had served only to plunge [Echigo](#) into the chaos of war. His father was surely grieving. What had he come here to do? What had he been to Kenshin?

(What is it thou wouldst have me do...?!)

Wraaaaugh!

Harsh shouts suddenly erupted nearby.

He turned. The enemy soldiers would soon reach the top.

(I will not die at a stranger's hand!)

As he raised the naked dagger to his carotid artery, he suddenly looked at the hand-mirror beside him.

He saw himself in the mirror.

"...!"

He started.

The person in the mirror was not him.

It was a woman.

A long-haired woman holding a dagger against her neck!

(That's not...!)

He met the eyes of his mirror-self.

(That is not me...!)

It was not him.

A beautiful woman with long black hair...his beloved...

He covered his mouth with one hand.

Terror rekindled within him. That terrible moment he had never wanted to recall. He and the woman in the mirror began to shake as she stared back at him, eyes wide. Unmistakable.

The person here, the one reflected in the mirror, was—

(Minako...!)

Someone was calling to him, the voice a scream.

As he tried to turn, someone's chest suddenly pressed against his back, embracing him from behind. He could not shake it off.

A strength as indomitable as a prayer.

Praying—*don't go anywhere...!*

—Kagetora-sama...!

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## Chapter 1: Dreaming Memories

The

distant voice drew rapidly closer. It had been calling to him for a while now. Who...? He recognized the voice—it was familiar to him. But whose...?

"...ketora. Wake up! Hey, wake up already, geez...!"

He could suddenly hear it quite clearly.

"Kagetora!"

Takaya shivered and abruptly woke.

The voice had pulled him back to reality.

"...Ah...!..."

Takaya panted wildly for several seconds, wide-eyed and frozen on his bed, unable for a moment to distinguish the boundary between dream and reality.

"Finally awake over there?"

Chiaki was hovering over him. Takaya found his voice at last.

"... Chiaki...?"

How long had he been standing there, trying to wake him? Chiaki Shuuhei let out a deep sigh of relief and combed back velvety hair.



"...Geez, guess that was some nightmare. It's like I couldn't wake you or something."

"A dream..." Takaya murmured uncertainly, and remembered that he had gone to sleep in a hotel room.

It had been...a dream—

He let out a long breath. His entire body was covered in sweat. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Its hands stood at just before six.

"Argh, geez, now I'm awake. I was supposed to be able to sleep for two more hours!" Chiaki griped, and turned back to the other bed. Chiaki was apparently not a morning person. "I'm going back to sleep. Don't wake me 'til eight," he instructed roughly over his shoulder, then rolled over and began to breathe in deep, even breaths once more.

"..."

Takaya leveraged his oddly heavy body out of bed and walked over to the pitcher on the table. His throat was terribly parched. He combed his hair back as he poured cold water into a cup.

(Was that a dream just now—...?)

And yet it had been so real. More than real. It had felt too much like he was there. Lately, all his dreams were like this.

(Why...?)

Even when he was asleep he didn't feel like he was sleeping. On the contrary, he awoke feeling even more exhausted and lethargic. At this point he couldn't help but wonder if it might be better if he never went to sleep at all.

(But what the heck was that...?)

He tried to recall, suddenly feeling ill at ease in his own body. A dream—...?

Had all of that been something randomly made up by his mind?

No, probably not... It had been—yes. A past experience manifesting in his dreams as a warped version of itself. That he knew the circumstances surrounding that time was proof.

(The [Otake no Ran](#) ...)

Broken fragments surfaced in his mind if he reached for the memories. The setting of his first death: the generals' uprising, [Samegao Castle](#) besieged, the trusted retainers who had remained with him to the end, all of it from that time.

All of it being reproduced in his dreams.

Even the despair he felt then—

(Why am I dreaming about all that ancient history *now*?)

The thoughts sat like a massive stone on his chest, and he sighed. But he immediately returned to himself and realized likewise how odd it was for him to be thinking these thoughts.

(What does it mean...?)

There had been something strange about his dream. But he couldn't quite put his finger on how and what. He followed the course of the dream once more, attempting to organize his disjointed thoughts. —There was just one thing he couldn't understand.

The reflection of the woman with black hair.

The woman in the mirror was the one thing he didn't understand at all. In the dream, he had apparently thought of her as 'Minako,' but he had no idea what that meant. Had the name 'Minako' held some meaning for him? He had no clue who she was. ...No, he remembered hearing about her. But—

(I guess it was just a dream after all...?)

Were these images left floating in his mind just memories he had fabricated at random in his dreams? Or...

His body still vividly recalled the feeling of someone's arms around him. The voice at his back—it had unmistakably belonged to [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) .

Takaya pressed a hand against his chest and took deep breaths, trying to calm his still-racing heart. Turning, he saw that Chiaki was already asleep once more. Takaya looked out the window.

It was the morning of their second day in [Nara](#) .

What would appear to be the beginning of another hot day.

Gazing out at the early-morning scenery of [Nara City](#) , Takaya drank the cup of cold water to the last drop.

Takaya and Chiaki had arrived in [Nara](#) yesterday in Chiaki's Leopard, though predictably Takaya had been violently opposed back in [Matsumoto](#)

"Screw you! If you think I'm getting into a car with you driving, you've got another think coming!" he'd yelled, and raised a big fuss about taking his bike or better the train.

At the end of his rant, Yuzuru had said simply, "Huh? But Chiaki's a great driver, you know."

So Takaya had reluctantly gotten into the car.

They arrived towards evening. Agreeing that they would start the investigation the next day, they had settled into a hotel and gone right to bed.

It was now the following morning.

In the end, it was close to nine when Chiaki (who put up a stalwart pretense of being asleep no matter how much Takaya tried to wake him) got up again, and with some puttering about, around ten by the time they left the hotel.

They had breakfast at a fast food restaurant near the [Nara JR station](#) .

"Fireballs...?"

Chiaki nodded as he bit into his cheeseburger. "Yeah."

"And they're flying around?"

"Looks like it." Chiaki said, raising the cheeseburger over his head.

"Lumps of fire around this size, appearing night after night. I've heard that they're occasionally flitting around in the city too—they've become a hot topic of conversation in these parts."

Takaya plucked his soda straw out of his mouth.

"So maybe they're disembodied souls or will-o'-the-wisps?"

"Yeah, probably, but—" Chiaki replied, reaching for the potato on Takaya's tray. "—they've done a lot of damage."

"Hey, stop that, that's mine!"

"Don't be so stingy. Houses and woods have been going up in flames because of those fireballs. Though they never directly injured anybody." Chiaki's eyes glinted behind his glasses. "Until the other day, when somebody got killed..."

"What?"

Takaya stopped the hand reaching for his potato. Chiaki tossed the last bite of his cheeseburger into his mouth and crumbled up the wrapper.

"The story is that he was attacked by the fireballs—and since this is the first time it's happened, the situation could be heading downhill

fast."

"So Naoe commanded us to exterminate them?"

"Well...I don't know about 'commanded.'" Chiaki mumbled the words, and drained the rest of his soda as if to wash them down. "Oh, he also said that since you can use your <<powers>> now, I should train you to control them so that you'll be able to call on them at need. So I'll be drawing on you as much as I can."

"Did he really say that?"

"Yup yup," Chiaki nodded, and Takaya sulked.

"And you didn't ask him, 'Are you coming or what?' What does he think we are? Geez."

"Sounds like his family is pretty busy right now. It's the season for Buddhist memorial services, so I guess he's got his hands full raking in the money."

Takaya pressed a hand against his forehead and groaned.

"Oh, that's right. He's a monk..."

"Well, he'll get here as fast as he can. Haruie is watching over Narita, and you'd better hurry up and learn to use your <<powers>> without him around, too."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said."

Takaya glared at Chiaki, more and more annoyed.

"Well? So does this case have anything to do with the <<Yami-Sengoku >>?"

"Who knows? But I'd be just as happy if there was no connection at all— then we can eliminate them on the spot and head back to Matsumoto ."

Nara was much too hot. Chiaki gulped down the ice in his cup for good measure. Takaya bit into his potato, chin propped up in one hand. He had only ever been in Nara once before, on a junior high school field trip. Compared with Matsumoto , where air conditioners were often not needed even in summer, Nara seemed to practically seethe with heat. Put plainly, it left Shinshuu visitors exhausted.

(Though I'm glad we have a car...)

The problem was the driver.

"All right, 'bout time we got going," Chiaki declared, and stood.

"I'm not done eating..."

"There's still time before the funeral." Chiaki looked down at Takaya, tray in hand.

"Funeral...?"

"Didn't I tell you that somebody died from the fireballs? There's gonna be a funeral for him, so I thought we'd take a look. But before that we should go around and talk to the eyewitnesses."

Chiaki stooped to lean close to Takaya.

"I'll bring the car, so wait for me outside. Be sure to wash your hands after you finish eating, 'cause I don't want you touching my Leopard with those greasy paws."

"Chi-a-ki..."

"See ya," Chiaki said, waving, and headed for the exit.

He was completely impossible, and Takaya wanted to resent Naoe for sticking them together. Yes, Chiaki was indeed an experienced driver, Takaya had learned while riding with him yesterday. But he'd forgotten the one thing Yuzuru had added. Chiaki was, in a word—

Reckless.

His heart had been in his mouth the entire time they were on the highway.

Chiaki overtook cars like a madman with a moral objection against having other cars driving in front of him—with the speedometer pushing 140 km/hour <sup>[1]</sup> the whole way. Not to mention, his handling of the wheel was absolutely

reckless, and Takaya had lost count of how many near misses they'd had.

He was pretty sure yesterday had shaved ten years off his life.

Yet according to Chiaki, Yuzuru had taken his driving perfectly calmly.

Takaya suddenly wanted to hide his face in his hands.



(That's Yuzuru for you...)

Even scarier was the fact that Yuzuru got along quite well with Chiaki.

Though he would have preferred anything to being stuck with Chiaki, he told himself to be patient until Naoe arrived.

(Once he gets here, we'll see who gets stuck with what.)

Takaya hadn't yet stopped to realize that there would also be one more person who was a master of sarcasm-with-a-straight-face.

He stuffed the potato into his mouth and stood.

He made it a point to leave his hands unwashed.

Summer vacation had begun nation-wide.

Nara was a prominent sight-seeing destination, but few tourists were venturing out to the temples in the intense heat. There were very few field trips in the summer, so being able to avoid the usual tourist crowds was a plus, but temple-touring under the blazing sun would have tried the training of a monk. Of course, having a car with functioning air conditioning was a different story...

Takaya and Chiaki took National Highway 10 straight towards Tenri .

"So are the onshou acting up in this area too or what?"

Chiaki replied, hands gripping the steering wheel, "The proximity of this area to the capital meant that quite a few violent battles were

fought here during the Sengoku , so naturally there'd be a lot of onryou ."

"Nara too? What happened in Nara during the Sengoku ?"

"..."

Chiaki felt a slight headache coming on at Takaya's innocent question.

He managed to pull himself together and answer steadily, "Well, Nara is famous for being full of ridiculously old temples dating back to the Tempyou and Hakuhou Eras. Though I'm not surprised that you don't know anything about them

except from your field trip. There're also a lot of fine old castles and fortresses and the like around here."

Takaya said admiringly, "Huh... That's the first time I've heard of it."

"Then you should at least do your schoolwork, you lazy bum."



"So," Chiaki continued, "apparently even Oda found attacking the provinces around the capital remarkably difficult, leaving him at quite a loss. That was probably the reason he finally withdrew from the [Northeast](#) for a while.

"Oda...? Speaking of which, Naoe said that Oda was behind Mogami earlier, too."

"He probably wanted to stop Takeda's advance into the [Northeast](#) . But it looks like Oda didn't expect such violent opposition from the [onshou](#) of the provinces around the capital. Well, Oda did a bunch of really vicious things to them, too. Like setting [Mt. Hiei](#) on fire and the atrocities against [Araki](#) . There're a lot of them who became [onryou](#) because of their hatred for him; you could say he's reaping what he sowed..."

Takaya glanced at Chiaki's profile.

"So this place is crawling with Oda's people, too? Is that why we didn't bring Yuzuru?"

"..."

The light changed. Chiaki calmly stepped on the break and twisted with a grunt to hand the cassette box on the back seat to Takaya.

"Change the tape."

"Huh...?"

He swapped the cassette tape and asked again, "That guy Ranmaru, he said that he'd take Yuzuru the next time they met, didn't he?"

"..."

"In [Sendai](#) , that amazing power—that was Yuzuru's, wasn't it?"

Chiaki was silent for a moment. [Gouzanze-Myouou](#) and [Daiitoku-Myouou](#) in the skies above [Sendai](#) , battling [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) 's enormous '[koko](#) ' Obviously moving in answer to Yuzuru's power.

"Is Ranmaru saying that he wants that power? So what do you think Yuzuru is? Are you guys planning to involve him further even if he has nothing to do with the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>?!"

Chiaki twitched and glared at Takaya crossly.

"Like you should talk."

"???"

"Whose fault d'you think it is that we gotta go through all this extra trouble to begin with, dammit? It's your fault, you ass, your fault!"

"Wh-what're you talking about? Why is it *my* fault?"

"If you hadn't lost your memories, we would've known Narita's true nature a long time ago! Then we could've dealt with it! At least take some responsibility for it, you bonehead!"

"How would I know! What the hell are you talking about, 'Narita's true nature?' Yuzuru is Yuzuru!"

"That's obvious, but that's not what I'm talking about—haven't I told you that before, you bonehead?!"

"Stop calling me a bonehead, you [zashikiwarashi](#) !"

"Zashikiwarashi ? The hell is with that, you stupid tiger!"

"What did you say?!"

"If you've got a problem with stupid tiger, then how about useless...!"

"Y-y-y-y-you bastard! That's the one thing you're not allowed to call me!"

*Beep beep—!*

The signal had turned green. The car behind them blasted its horn at them impatiently. They turned and yelled in unison, "Shut UP!"

Chiaki stepped on the gas as they fumed at each other.

"You..." Chiaki broke the silence, "before you sealed your memories, you would've known who Narita is."

"...?"

"If you had them, you'd know what Kousaka meant by 'a menace to the Roku Dou Kai ' too."

Takaya's expression changed.

"A menace to...the Roku Dou Kai ?"

"You're with Narita because you knew it, right? You performed kanshou at his side, didn't you?"

"... Wait a minute." Takaya's voice was hoarse. He unthinkingly leaned

forward. "What does that mean? What are you talking about? What do you

mean by menace? What are you saying Yuzuru is?"

"..."

"I performed **kanshou** close to Yuzuru because I knew that?! Are you saying that I took this body—I performed **kanshou** on Ougi Takaya because of Yuzuru?"

"Kagetora," Chiaki interrupted. "I don't have **reisa** like **Kousaka** 's, so I can't tell people's past-life identities by the patterns of their soul-nuclei. That power he displayed in **Sendai** , that strange change that came over Narita. According to **Masamune** , that was probably his true form, appearing in response to the mantra."

"Yuzuru's true form...?"

"Which is exceedingly dangerous."

Takaya's gaze fell to his knees.

"I...I don't know. I don't know anything about what you're saying. What are you trying to tell me?! That Yuzuru is—what in the world is he...?!"

Chiaki looked at Takaya impassively.

"So you really don't remember anything."

"Ah—..."

Chiaki's words, heard for the first time, shook Takaya.

"What do you mean, that...I know?"

"Kagetora..."

Takaya pressed a hand against his temple.

"What the hell are you talking about?! I don't know anything! What is Yuzuru?! You're saying that I know... What does that mean?!"

"Kagetora, calm down."

"I don't understand anything you guys say! Where are my memories? How the hell do I call them up? If I don't remember anything, am I suddenly gonna just recall the past one day, just like that?! Is that what's gonna happen...?!"

Chiaki stepped on the break. He brought the car to a stop close to the curb, turned on the emergency lights, and slowly turned to Takaya. He said in a low voice, "You've actually started to remember, haven't you?"

"...!"

"Isn't that why you had that nightmare this morning?"

That dream—

Takaya's eyes widened in shock

"That was..."

"Even if it wasn't, you've still remembered how to perform [choubuku](#) , haven't you? You could do it before you realized it, even though you never thought you could. Isn't that what it means to remember?"

Takaya closed his mouth. Chiaki leaned with both arms against the steering wheel and looked at Takaya.

"Well, it's not the end of the world or anything. Just remember this, Kagetora—"

"..."

"The answers are all within you. What you think you want to know and what we want to know—you already have all of the answers."

Chiaki's gaze moved back to the road ahead of them.

"... Don't run away."

"..."

And with that, he quietly stepped on the accelerator.

It took them around thirty minutes to reach [Tenri](#) from [Nara](#) .

[Tenri City](#) was the spiritual headquarters of [Tenrikyo](#) , famous for being the land of its origin; the city had developed along

with the religion for which it had been named. Lodging facilities of various sizes built for the pilgrims who gathered here from all over the country noticeably dotted the city and seemed to reach the hundreds.

Having heard that the fireballs appeared frequently here, they parked the car in front of the station and got off.



"I'm pretty sure the house that got burned down is around here. So what next...?"

"The fireballs aren't gonna appear in the middle of the day, are they?"

"I guess. Well, why don't we try asking a cop?"

"A cop? Hey! Wait, Chiaki!"

Chiaki was already strolling towards the police box.

"Scuse me, I was wondering if you could tell me..."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

Takaya stood and waited by the car. Groups of children streamed out of the station's ticket-examination gate. The faithful came to Tenri from all over the country for the 'Return to the Main Sanctuary' pilgrimage, and since it was summer vacation, their children gathered from all different parts of the country as well. The welcome reception of stuffed animals was held at the station, and it looked terribly busy.

(But it's freakin' hot...)

The heat of the summer sun beat squarely down on him. Takaya held up his hand against the glare and squinted at the bright blazing sun. The Leopard's exterior was hot enough to fry an egg; he leaned his arms against it and immediately jumped back at the scorching heat.

Stuffed rabbits were shaking hands here and there in the station.

(Huh, that's some will-power the guys in there've got.)

He looked at them sympathetically as Chiaki returned from the police box.

"Got it. Let's go."

"So he gave you all the details?"

"Well, you know."

They climbed back into the car.

The car burst forward with a screech of tires and made a U-turn at the terminal.

"There's a house that got burned down further down the road. Around a place called Yanagimoto ."

"I don't care 'bout you, but at least be gentler with the car," Takaya, who had hit his head against the window, grumbled.

Ignoring him, Chiaki said, "Looks like there're a lot of 'em around here. The fireballs start coming out around evening. He said that maybe we'll even see one if we're lucky."

"You're pretty damn shameless, going to the cop to ask for directions when you're driving without a license."

"What's wrong with that?"

They arrived at the site of the conflagration in Yanagimoto Town on the outskirts of [Tenri City](#) soon after. The land nearby was dotted with ancient

tombs, the [Sujiin Imperial Tomb](#) among them. The ruins of the house stood on a side road a small distance away from a bus stop on the national highway.

"Damn, looks like it went up like a matchbox."

Its black-scorched pillars lay collapsed on the ground. Apparently the owner had somehow escaped unharmed. But the cause of a conflagration as

spectacular as this could not have been a fireball of the simple phosphorescent variety.

"All right, let's see if we can go find somebody to talk to," Chiaki said, looking around. There were several shops nearby. Spotting a middle-aged woman napping in front of one of the shops, Chiaki immediately headed over.

"Scuse me."

(Some nerve he's got...)

Takaya followed reluctantly.

At the sound of Chiaki's voice, the woman, who looked to be in her fifties, opened her eyes muzzily.

"Yes, welcome."

"Ah, actually, we're here gathering information for an article. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?" Chiaki asked, and produced a tattered business card. Takaya peered at it. Written there was the name

of an editor for a well-known women's magazine.

Takaya shouted (in a whisper) into Chiaki's ear: "What the hell?! When did you—where'd you steal that from?!"

"That's not a very nice thing to say. I picked it up."

Apparently he'd play the same hand with the cop earlier. Chiaki deliberately raised his voice.

"Let's...see... I was hoping you could tell me about the fireballs that have been appearing so frequently in this area."

"Aah..."

Apparently they weren't the first to ask. The woman replied as if she had already answered the same question several times, "There are a lot of them in the area. Groups of them fly around like fireflies from evening into the night."

"The fireballs...?"

"You can find them just floating around in the alleys around here. The police and fire departments can't find the cause. They hem and haw about it. I thought they were creepy at first, but I guess I'm used to them now."

Takaya and Chiaki looked at each other.

"A lot of folks from the media have been out here. It's odd, but even though you and I can see them 'em plain as day, they don't appear on pictures at all."

"They don't appear on photos?"

"That's right. Thought they were illusions or some such, but they're not. They're hot when you stand next to them, and they burned that house down to the ground just like that..."

The woman tilted her head, and suddenly told them in a hushed, mysterious tone, "Folks around here are saying that it's the 'hoihoi fire'."

Their eyes widened.

"'Hoihoi fire'? What is that?"

"It's a local legend," the woman replied, and pointed at the green mountains beyond the highway. "That mountain you see over there—that's

called [Ryuuouzan](#) —the 'Mountain of the Dragon king.' A long time ago, there was a castle there, and I guess in the [Sengoku](#) it got surrounded by enemies, and a lot of people were killed."

Takaya and Chiaki gazed at the Mountain of the Dragon King.

"Maybe those spirits carry a grudge or something, but the story goes that if you shout 'hoihoi!' at the mountain on evenings when it looks like rain, the fireballs come streaming down from above and burn the person to death."

Takaya and Chiaki looked at each other again.

"If you shout 'hoihoi', the fireballs will...?"

"I don't know anybody who's done it, so I know don't if it's the truth or not." The woman smiled widely. "Perhaps they're scared after all."

Takaya glanced at Chiaki. "Wanna try it?"

"You do it."

The woman also told them that she had heard rumors of someone actually witnessing the fireballs falling from the [Ryuuouzan](#) area.

"Folks are also saying that someone called them down."

Takaya crossed his arms, lost in thought. Chiaki asked, "When did the fireballs start appearing?"

"...Around the end of last month, I think?" The woman replied, and added, "Oh, if you're planning to investigate the 'hoihoi fires', you should go to [Chougaku Temple](#) . You'll find the castle's 'bloody ceiling' there."

And they looked at each other for a third time.

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**footnotes**

[1] ~87 miles/hr

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## Chapter 2: Maiden of the Spiritual Heartland

[Chougaku Temple](#) , one of the area's famed ancient temples, lay along a road at the foot of [Mt. Ryuuou](#) beyond the highway.

Chiaki and Takaya had come here immediately after speaking with the woman.

Cicadas chorused in the verdant, luxuriant forest. Takaya could hear the croaks of bullfrogs from the large pond in front of the main temple. He turned to Chiaki, who had thrown himself down on the floor of the temple's open corridor.

"So waddaya think?" Takaya asked.

Chiaki replied, "That the fireballs in question have something to do with this 'hoihoi fire'."

"..."

Chiaki looked up at the ceiling. The boards were stained with countless black spots in the shape of hands or bare feet. —Bloodstains of people who had died four hundred years ago. It was said that the boards that formed this ceiling had once been the floorboards of the fallen [Ryuuouzan Castle](#) .

Chiaki muttered, gazing up at the black stains of the 'bloody ceiling',  
"This isn't the only place where the fireballs've been sighted. They've spread as far as [Nara City](#) , Kooriyama , and Ikoma .

I'm not sure if the fireballs are the 'hoihoi fire' of the legend, but we can't completely dismiss the fact that their numbers are greatest around here, either."

"Hup." Chiaki leveraged himself to a sitting position and looked over at the mountain.

"[Ryuuouzan Castle](#) . [Yamato](#) commander [Toichi Tootada](#) built it during the [Sengoku](#) , but it fell to [Matsunaga Danjou Hisahide](#) . I guess these bloodstains are from that time." Chiaki made a sour face, groaning, "Matsunaga Danjou...huh?"

"What? You know something?"

"No—well. I told you that somebody died in an attack by the fireballs, right? That person lives right next to [Mt. Shigi](#) ..."

"[Mt. Shigi](#) ...?"

"That was where the main castle of [Matsunaga Danjou Hisahide](#) , the head of the army which attacked and sacked this castle, stood. It's in Ikoma , beyond those open fields. I've heard that his [onryou](#) was recently resurrected."

"The [onryou](#) of [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) ? Then you're saying that he's the reason these fireballs are appearing...?"

"That's my hunch. This 'hoihoi fire' is probably a manifestation of the [onryou](#) of the soldiers who died at [Mt. Ryuuou](#) —[kaki](#) , or [onryou](#) bearing [kaki](#) . If it's true that their old enemy [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) has been resurrected, the [onryou](#) of [Mt. Ryuuou](#) are probably moving in response to the grudge they bear him."

Though they didn't know for sure if that was the reason, they could



feel the <<malice>>-filled aura of the area around Mt. Ryuudou roiling with strange activity. Heated spiritual energy rose from the mountain's summit where the castle had once stood and pushed like a mountain wind against Chiaki's back.

Chiaki sighed and stood.

"Well, let's go take a look around Mt. Shigi for now. We may be able to learn something there. But everything starts with investigation—yup, good old-fashioned legwork and investigation."

Takaya looked up at the incandescent sun beating down on them and wearily stuck out his tongue like an overheated dog.

"But it's so freakin' hot. Can't we do something about this heat?"

They were in a basin between two mountains, so there wasn't much they could do. Chiaki suggested with aplomb over his shoulder, "If you're that hot, then why don't you go ask the dragon god at the summit for some rain?"

"Fine, but you're doing that 'hoihoi' thing first."

The sky darkened as they retraced their steps over the gravel shrine path.

"?"

In the blink of an eye pitch-black clouds shrouded the mountain as if herded by a sudden gust of wind, and thunder clapped in the distance.

"Ack. Seriously?!"

"Hmm?" Takaya lifted his head, feeling a large drop of water fall onto it—and the rain suddenly came pelting down as if a bucket had been upended over them.

"Waaah!" they yelled, and dashed for the parking lot at full speed.

"You idiot! It's because you said all that weird stuff!"

They were completely soaked by the time they reached the car. Chiaki glared at Takaya shouting in his ear and started the engine.

"Stop blaming me. If that were really true, then it'd be your fault—your fault, d'you hear me? It'd be like summoning [Bishamonten](#) , you blockhead."

"What did you say...?!"

"Oh damn. I can't believe it's this late already. The funeral starts at 1:30."

He abruptly stepped on the gas, and Takaya's head jerked back.

"Dammit...what'd you do if we got whiplash?!"

"Let's...see...get on Nishimei Hill from the Tenri Interchange , then take the second...no, third...?"

"Hey! Stop ignoring people when they're talking to you!"

"Oh, quit yer whining already."

More annoyed by the minute, Takaya turned to look out the window.

Elementary school students ran down the rice paddy road holding

swimming bags, perhaps on their way home from the pool. They ran along

without umbrellas in the sudden twilight, voices raised in shrieks or cheers, looking like they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

They returned to [Tenri](#) and from there headed for [Mt. Shigi](#) .

They took the Expressway east, and by the time they got off at the Houryu Temple Interchange , the sudden afternoon shower had already lifted. In the passenger seat,

Takaya shifted his glare between the map and the note with the address as they drove towards their destination.

"Uuum. After Ouji Station we cross the river..."

"Hey, hurry up and navigate. It's Sangou Town —just find Sangou Town!"

"I know already, so shut up... Ack! Take a left here!"

"...!"

With a violent screech of tires the Leopard swerved left. The centrifugal force of the turn threw both of them to the side.

"That was late, you blockhead!"

"You're going too fast, you bastard!"

The car speeded along half out of control, carrying its two shouting

passengers towards the victim's residence in Sangou Town at the foot of [Mt. Shigi](#) . It was slightly past two when they arrived.

They found the house immediately. Even without checking the map they spotted the 'house holding the funeral' easily.

It was a large residence with a tiled roof, enclosed within a white plaster wall. Around it were a group of people in mourning dress.

They parked beside a rice paddy a small distance away and alighted. A cool breeze, left over from the rain just past, blew softly against them.

"Over there...?" Takaya asked, standing on wet asphalt. "Pretty nice house."

"Looks like he's a first-generation land owner or something. The papers said that he's supposed to be the director of some company..." Chiaki replied, taking a note and a copy of a newspaper out of a schedule book.

"The victim is Shiohara Kouzou, fifty-eight. He's the representative director of Shiohara Construction, which has its head office in [Nara](#) . Looks like it's the leading construction company around these parts. He died the evening of the day before yesterday. It happened near the company, and no cause for the fire was found. The police apparently suspect self-immolation, but it was actually fireballs that caused it."

"No witnesses?"

"There were. It's written here in the papers that several company employees witnessed him getting hit by fireballs."

"Hmm..." Takaya responded, frowning.

He could feel a strange chill against his skin coming from somewhere ahead of them. Well, it was certainly no fun watching somebody's funeral. This aura was similar to what he had felt at [Mt. Ryuuou](#) .

(Are there any [onryou](#) around?)

The sutra-chanting coming from the house ended. The hearse passed the rice paddies with their rain-glossed rice plants waving in the wind and came to a stop in front of the gate. The funeral procession would soon begin.

"Let's get a little closer?"

"...Yeah."

In front of the gate were a crowd of attendants and people from the neighborhood who had come to lend a hand with the funeral. Older women

in aprons had gathered in droves for the send-off. Takaya and Chiaki slipped into their midst in time to catch their whispered gossip.

"That's yet another death."

"This time calamity has overtaken Shiohara-san, too..."

Takaya and Chiaki looked at each other as they unintentionally

eavesdropped on the hushed conversation.

"That makes three people."

"It's only been half a year since his wife died."

"Really, what is happening here?"

A voice from a speaker interrupted the women's whispers. A man who appeared to be the chief mourner began addressing the crowd from within the wall.

"A man...?" The realization gave Chiaki pause. "The chief mourner isn't his wife?"

"Huh?" Takaya asked in response, but just then people began moving from the yard towards them. The funeral procession was finally starting. The noise increased for a moment before the crowd parted into two lines, and the bereaved family appeared from among the attendants.

A young woman around junior high school age wearing a school uniform carried the portrait of the deceased against her chest. Her long hair was pulled back and tied up in a bundle. Her mournful expression and bowed head gave her the impression of a frail maiden. Behind her came a middle-aged couple, followed by a number of men carrying the white coffin.

"Ah..."

Takaya suddenly made a small sound.

Chiaki responded, "What?"

"Just...over there..."

Chiaki looked in the direction Takaya had indicated. The white coffin was being carried into the hearse, the door solemnly closed with the bereaved family looking on...

"!"

Chiaki's eyes suddenly widened.

Something that looked like a dusky fog hung above their heads. The fog was even thicker around the young woman carrying the portrait.

(Ugh...!) Chiaki and Takaya reacted at the same time.

An unmistakable <<malice>> had struck both of them. The aura of evil released by the mass of black "energy" clinging to the young woman was plain. A glance was enough to tell them that the thing had considerable power.

(Is that some sort of [tsukumogami](#) —?)

Chiaki focused his will and began a [spirit sensing](#) , feeling as if he were straining his eyes to see into the dark mass. The fog hovering above the young woman immediately unblurred. It took on the shape of a roundish vase. No, not vase. Kettle. It was a tea kettle!

Chiaki sucked in a startled breath.

(Could that be...!)

"Murderer!"

A woman's shrill voice suddenly rose from within the premises.

"...!"

Chiaki and Takaya came out of their trance and turned towards the sound.

A young woman wearing mourning dress sprinted through the attendants towards them, hair disheveled and wild.

"Don't let her deceive you! That girl isn't human! She's a monster! She killed him! Monster! Murderer!"

The attendants were in an uproar. She continued shouting even as several people held her back. Her accusing finger pointed straight at the young woman carrying the portrait.





"She killed him! Monster! Give him back! Murderer! Murderer!!"

The woman was restrained and pulled back into the house, but they could hear her howling even then. The middle-aged couple, apparently relatives of the deceased, looked suspiciously at the young woman thus condemned. This was apparently not the first time she had heard the accusations. Her face noticeably paled, and the hands holding the portrait shook slightly. She continued to look down at the ground, biting her lip.

Takaya, held back by Chiaki, looked at him reproachfully. Chiaki's brows creased in doubt.

(What was that all about?)

Attempting to temporize, the procession started again as if nothing of note had occurred. The young woman climbed into the hearse's

passenger

seat.

It gave a long, drawn-out blare of its horns before moving slowly out of a crowd of attendants standing with hands pressed together in prayer.

The funeral was at an end once the hearse had driven out of sight. The relatives of the deceased climbed into a microbus headed for the crematorium, and the attendants and the rest of the crowd dispersed at their discretion. That was when people started talking.

Which meant Takaya and Chiaki couldn't leave yet. Their expressions were similarly grim.

(That kid, a monster...)

In a quiet spot, Chiaki found an attendant who had been an eyewitness.

He promptly produced the fake business card and succeeded in procuring his story.

"I really saw it. The police were totally useless," Shiohara's private driver, a man in his thirties called Aoki, told them somewhat excitedly. "It was probably around six o'clock in the evening. I brought out the car like I always do to take the director home. Suddenly I heard this scream outside. When I rushed out, the director was covered in flames. It was horrible—Yamamoto-san said, 'We have to put it out right now', and we tried, but—"

"Yamamoto-san is...?"

"The director's secretary. And then, when we just about got it out, these volleyball-sized fireballs came right out of the sky. And it wasn't just one or two of them, but a whole bunch. There were flames all around us, and it was just totally out of control. When we finally threw enough water on the boss to put out the fire and got him to the hospital, it was already too late."

Chiaki made exaggerated sounds of interest as he pretended to take notes. "And these fireballs, were they the same kind as the ones people around here have been talking so much about recently?"

"Well. I haven't seen them myself, so I'm not sure, but... I think they're probably the same."

Chiaki and Takaya exchanged glances: bull's-eye.

Takaya took up the questioning.

"On a different subject, is the young lady who was carrying the portrait the director's daughter?"

"Hmm. That was *Nagi*-san."

"Nagi?"

Aoki nodded and replied with a worried look, "She is his daughter, but she's not related to him by blood. She's the daughter of his wife with her former husband."

"Former husband—so does that mean she remarried? She brought her

daughter into her new marriage...?"

"Yes. The director was adopted into his wife's family. He entered her family and took her family name when he married her."

"Then was her former husband also adopted into her family?"

"His wife was the only child of her family. People say that her first husband died in a traffic accident. It happened before young Miss Nagi entered elementary school. His wife died half a year ago, so only the two of them were living in this house."

"Hmm," Takaya murmured.

Beside him, Chiaki continued, "Who was that young woman earlier? The one who shouted 'murderer' at Nagi-san..."

Aoki's face instantly stiffened. He answered bitterly, his voice full of loathing and dislike, "That was the director's lover."

"Ah, lover?"

"Yes. Kizaki Mieko. She apparently started out as a hostess. They say that the director's known her for a while, and she's certainly been coming around to the company for a long time."

Takaya's mouth tightened slightly, and he looked towards the house. He had always found this type of talk distasteful. He asked, "But why did she call his daughter a 'murderer'? Is she saying that Nagi-san had something to do with the director's death?"

"No, that's absurd!" Aoki's hands shook in anger. "There is no way

young Miss Nagi is involved. It was the fireballs that killed him. Why would Miss Nagi..."

Chiaki stood with his arms crossed, deep in thought. After a moment he asked, "Well, we don't intend to put anything about the family's private circumstances in the article, but...if it's all right with you, would you happen to know Kizaki-san's phone number?"

Chiaki and Takaya managed to worm their way into the office. They couldn't find the secretary, Yamamoto, so Aoki agreed to introduce them to a company employee called Suzuki.

"I'm pretty certain it's registered with our list of client names..." Suzuki said as he looked through the thick file.

Chiaki asked, looking shocked, "Even your director's mistress is a client of the company?"

"No, not at all. But I'm sure I've seen the contact address in here quite a few times..."

Takaya and Chiaki exchanged glances.

"Where is the director's office?"

"Aaaah! You can't go in there!"

"?"

"The director gave us very firm directions to let no one enter his

office. Even his secretary doesn't go in there. And besides, it's locked, so we can't get in anyway!"

"Oh?" Chiaki's eyes narrowed to slits as he turned to Suzuki. "Ah, Suzuki-san? Suzuki-san."

"Yes?"

Suzuki turned at the sound of Chiaki's oddly coaxing voice—and collapsed in place with a moan the instant he looked at Chiaki.

"Ack!" Takaya shouted, startled. "What...!"

He dashed to Suzuki's side and shook him frantically, but Suzuki had lost consciousness, still standing upright like a heron.

"Mister! Hey, Mister!" Takaya turned to Chiaki and gritted out, "Hey, Chiaki What the hell did you do to him?!"

"I only put him to sleep, that's allllll," he drawled with no hint of shame, already walking off in search of the director's office. He found it on the same floor, the office furthest in. Chiaki immediately squatted down next to the door and extracted two wires of different thicknesses from the day planner tucked under his arm. He thrust them one at a time into the keyhole, then proceeded to pick the lock with remarkable facility.

"What that woman said worries me. There must be a reason she called the guy's daughter a monster and a murderer. There's probably a clue in his personal effects."

"You...don't you think your way of doing things is a bit high-handed?"

"Nope, not at all."

The lock disengaged.

Chiaki opened the door to the director's office. Takaya followed him inside.

"!"

Their eyes widened at the same time.

"Wh-what the hell?"

The walls were covered with charms. They looked like temple charms, but affixed in an unusual manner.

"This..."

Chiaki approached a wall and stared at it for a long moment, then—

He reached out and carefully peeled off a single sheet.

"Are you sure you should be doing that?"

"This thing's already lost its potency. Actually, I'd have to do it even if it hadn't."

Chiaki turned to Takaya.

"The person that this charm was supposed to protect is no longer in this world, right? Shiohara somehow knew that he was going to be killed."

"That he was gonna be killed by his daughter? But this charm..."

"Probably the monster attached to his daughter rather than the girl herself." Chiaki enfolded the charm in his palm. "Looks like the rabbit hole goes deeper than we thought, huh?"

"..."

Takaya glared grimly at the eerie charm-covered wall.

After obtaining the contact information for Shiohara's mistress, Takaya and Chiaki returned to Shiohara's house.

Arms stretched out across the roof of the Leopard, Takaya opened the pull-tab on a can of juice and asked Chiaki, "The vase-monster attached to this 'Nagi' girl. D'you think it has any connection to the fireballs that killed Shiohara?"

"It was a kettle, not a vase. Kettle."

"Kettle?" he asked, pushing the pull-tab into the can. "Kettle—the black round iron thing?"

"That's a cauldron."

"The girl with the breadcrumb trail, then...?" [\[1\]](#)

"Are you even seriously thinking about this?" Chiaki demanded, leaning against the side of the driver's seat. "You're way off. From the looks



of it, it was a tea kettle **tsukumogami** ."

"**Tsukumogami** ?"

"A so-called phantom—the type that originates from an artifact.

Something that a person's malice attaches to, or an old object which a spirit makes its home, or an artifact that changes into something else as it ages. There are a lot of things it can mean, but in this case, it's something that started out as a tea kettle and became a phantom by a powerful concentration of the user's will."

Takaya blinked.

"So there really are such things as phantoms?"

"Well, they're actually masses of 'energy' created by the user's ill-will. But the **tsukumogami** clinging to that kid is gonna be a ton of trouble."

"Because?"

Chiaki scratched his head slightly. "'Cause that thing's probably the '**Hiragumo** '."

""**Hiragumo** '?"

"Yeah. A tea kettle **tsukumogami** that's been famous around here since way back. There's gotta be a

reason for it if you have something like that following you around."

"Should we exorcise it?"

"That would be the best-case scenario, but it'd take some doing to bring

down a phantom as strong as that."

"Hey, you'll be okay with that, right? I'll leave it to you, then."

"'I'll leave it to you' ain't gonna cut it. Geez, you. Gimme a little more help here. Think you've got enough of your spiritual senses back to do a [spirit sensing](#) ?"

Takaya tossed back the juice sheepishly. Well, that was probably true.

These past few weeks his spiritual senses had really developed (?) all of a sudden.

Chiaki made another sour face.

"But the 'hoihoi fires' *and* the '[Hiragumo](#) '? I'm getting a really bad feeling about this."

"?"

Takaya paused. Just as he opened his mouth to ask the reason—

"...!"

Takaya whirled to look behind him as if drawn by something there.

"What's wrong, Kagetora?"

Takaya stood motionless, stretching his senses all around them.

"Someone's staring at us..."

"What?"

Chiaki looked reflexively around them.

Takaya had felt a strange aura. He cautiously scanned their surroundings. But there was no one near them. Where was it coming from?

He could definitely feel someone appraising them—not a spirit, but someone with an aura cold and sharp as a tempered sword-blade. That chill aura so unlike anything belonging to an ordinary person... that hinted at a concealed, depthless power...

(Onshou ...?)

Or could it be—

(But—)

Takaya went on guard, his entire body tensed for battle. Chiaki said to him softly, "Kagetora. Never mind, ignore it."

"But, Chiaki—"

"It doesn't matter. We'll definitely come face to face with it later, anyway. Let's go."

Glaring over his shoulder, Takaya followed Chiaki's lead and climbed into the car. Chiaki started the engine and slowly stepped on the gas. The Leopard glided forward.

The aura receded. Whatever the case, coming here certainly seemed to have been the right decision.

Nara , this city which was the country's spiritual heartland, reeked of the

footnotes

[1] Takaya's actually punning rather colorfully here. Unfortunately, puns are by and large untranslatable. In Japanese, kettle is "kama" (釜). The actual conversation goes like this:

"It was a kettle, not a vase. Kettle."

"Kettle?" he asked, pushing the pull-tab into the can. "Kettle—the thing you cut grass with?"

"That's a sickle." (鎌, also read "kama").

"Then a guy who dresses and talks like a woman..." ("Kettle" or "pot" can also be slang for transvestite—"お釜", or "okama".)

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## Chapter 3: Moonlight Bodhisattva

"Your room number is 507. Here is your key. Please enjoy your stay."

"Thank you."

He picked up the white key card from the front counter and inquired, "I believe someone by the name of Chiaki Shuuhei is also staying here; would you be able to tell me his room number?"

"Chiaki-sama? Please give me one moment."

The female concierge in the pale beige uniform quickly examined the list of guests and replied with a smile, "Chiaki Shuuhei-sama from [Nagano](#) ? He hasn't returned yet, but he is staying in room 611."

"I see. When he does, could you let me know?"

"Of course. We will call your room."

"Thank you," Naoe responded, and headed for the elevator.

(Well, what next...?)

His family business concluded, Naoe had arrived in [Nara](#) earlier than he had expected. Chiaki and Takaya would already be out on their investigation. Putting the two of them together was—well, he certainly wouldn't have to worry about the <<power>> aspect, but it was a risky combination to say the least. He had lost no time making his way here.

Coming by bullet train had been all very well, but the problem was that he had arrived in the middle of the day. Since his beloved Cefiro had been put out of commission in [Yamagata](#), he didn't even have anything to use for the investigation.

(Maybe I should go through the rental car process today?) he thought as he opened the door to his room.

It was a neatly-tidied, spacious single. Taking off his jacket and tossing it on the sofa, he surveyed the scenery outside the window. The buildings near the [Kintetsu-Nara Station](#) blocked the northern mountain ranges from view. The hotel was within the city, but in front of him was a temple, with a cemetery straight below.

(So Kagetora-sama and Nagahide aren't back yet...?)

Gazing at the view outside, Naoe lit a cigarette.

He could see the Wakakusa Mountain Range beyond the city, shimmering in the heat.

(It's been a while since I last came to [Nara](#) ...)

Ten years or so, was it? Nostalgia swept through him. He'd been so busy that he could not recall at all.

(Ah, right...) He suddenly remembered as he loosened his necktie.

The last time he had come here had been—

(Before I found him.)

Ten years ago, before the <<Yami-Sengoku >> had spun so far out of control.

When the fruitless search for Kagetora had dragged him further and further into desperation.

A time that had perhaps been the most painful of his life.

And when impatience and anxiety had driven him into a near-neurotic state he'd come time and again to Nara .

As if in entreaty.

(Why is it I felt like that...?)

Naoe gazed at the clock on the bedside table.

It was a little past four-thirty, too late to start an investigation. And in two, three hours, they would be back.

(I shouldn't waste time waiting in my room.)

He would go pay a visit there, after so long.

Naoe softly snuffed the cigarette he had lit moments before and picked up the card key from the bedside table.

The sun, after scorching the City of Nara for the entire day, was now on its downward arc, and its light slanted through the trees from the west.

As he ascended the stone steps to the Great Southern Gate of [Toudai Temple](#) , he looked up at the recently-restored [Niou](#) statues.

There weren't many tourists left in [Nara Park](#) this late in the day, and the souvenir shops along the path to the shrine were beginning to close down. Even the deer which came out in herds during the day were scarcely to be seen; perhaps they had already returned to their woods for the night.

The destination of Naoe's visit was [Toudai Temple](#) .

Usually bustling with tourists, the temple was quiet now and virtually empty of both people and deer. There were still tourists leaving the Great Buddha Hall, but none going in.

Evening cicadas chorused around him.

He climbed shallow stairs past a stone pillar with the inscription 'Hall of the Second Month Shrine Path'.

(It hasn't changed...)

Although the appearance of [Nara City](#) had changed greatly, the unique grace of [Nara Park](#) in the eventide was exactly the same as it had been ten years ago. [Toudai Temple](#) was filled with people in the daytime, and although that innocent

vivaciousness was also pleasant, he could recall always deliberately choosing to come here in the evening in order to avoid the surging crowds...

Turning, he could see the golden ridge-tiles at both ends of the roof of the Great Buddha Hall glittering in the light of the westerning sun



beyond the trees.

Naoe slowly ascended the stone steps.

His work as Naoe Nobutsuna of the Meikai Uesugi Army meant that with the recent intensification of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> he had no leisure time to spend at home, but conversely he felt more at

ease both mentally and physically. The reason, of course, was that with the addition of Kagetora and Yasuda Nagahide the duties and responsibilities weighing on him had lessened.

(Unlike back then...)

Naoe paused as he abruptly realized that that was not the reason. No, the difference had been the absence of a single person.

It was that simple.

When the sun sank to its sleep and the city came aglow with its own lights, Naoe would be able to see him. When he returned to the hotel, Kagetora would probably already be there. He would be able to see him again.

(He is here.)

That single, simple reason.

But that thought alone was enough to evoke a gentle quietude within him. He had a home to return to. No matter where he went, the only place where he belonged was—at his side...

Thirty years ago, the final battle with Oda Nobunaga . Nobunaga's <<hakonha >> engulfed Kagetora, and he in turn took the brunt of Kagetora's <<choubuku >>.

And everything came to an end in the terrible explosion resulting from the head-on collision of their <<powers>>.

And yet they were not able to <<exorcise>> Nobunaga. Irobe Katsunaga , the only one among them who came out of that battle alive, was able to determine through his investigations that Nobunaga still remained in the world. But they knew nothing of Kagetora's whereabouts, whether he performed kanshou , or even if his soul still remained in the world. The horrendous power of the <<hakonha >> was said to be capable of destroying the soul itself—and if that were the case, then the soul would be lost even from the wheel of reincarnation.

Was Kagetora obliterated from the Roku Dou Kai ?

It took him seven years after performing kanshou on this body—on the fetus of Tachibana Yoshiaki—to heal the damage done to him in that battle. That was also around when he finally got in contact with Katsunaga. Katsunaga was able to confirm the kanshou of the other two—Yasuda Nagahide and Kakizaki Haruie . Whether or not Kagetora's soul still lived was the only question they were unable to answer.

He had intended to resign himself.

In a mind gone completely blank, his only thought was—*it's over*.

His own existence lost all meaning in the moment Kagetora ceased to

exist. So this was the end of the road for a life already lived for far too long.

But he would never be able to undergo reincarnation even if he stopped performing [kanshou](#) .

No, he had no doubt that he could if he wanted to do so... To have this soul sullied by the passage of four hundred years be cleansed, to have four hundred years of memories and sin and all else swept away, and then to be reborn as a purified soul. And yet—

He could not do it. In a world bereft of Kage-tora's existence he could not allow his own. He could not allow himself to exist, all oblivious, in this world where *he* did not.

If he could not return to 'nothingness', then nothing remained to him but insanity...

Tachibana's parents worried day and night over their child, who turned into a living puppet before their very eyes. School was impossible, so they did not try to send him; instead, they arranged to have him enter the priesthood and become a monk at the temple. He embraced the asceticism of priesthood wholeheartedly.

He convulsively tried to kill himself several times, but was restrained by his father's strict discipline.

*You see, there must be some meaning to you being here.* His father admonished him time and again.

That's a lie, he thought. That isn't true. He lived for Kagetora.

Kagetora was the only reason for his existence. But Kagetora was no longer here. And if he was no longer here, then...! Even if there was such a thing as Heaven's will, his existence no longer held any meaning.

*"There must be some meaning."*

Naoe looked up at the trees reaching toward the late afternoon sky.

(I suppose those words...were not a lie.)

Kagetora was still alive.

Even if he had lost his memories, he was alive—

The <<Yami-Sengoku >> had flared up around seven years ago as the onryou of Sengoku warlords began to awaken in rapid succession all across the country. Awareness of his duty as a member of the Meikai Uesugi Army gave him the determination to stay alive. Kenshin had commanded them to exorcise the onryou of the Sengoku warlords; even without Kagetora, their mission remained.

No—

In actuality, he cared not one whit about the mission.

He only wanted something that could numb these feelings.

He never believed his father's words.

Even so, a thread of possibility fought against the despair eating into his mind and heart, a hint of hope which he could not abandon.

He passed a plaza with a line of souvenir shops. Climbing a little further brought him out in front of the Hall of the Third Month.

Naoe walked alone toward the temple as the late afternoon sun continued to sink towards the horizon.

He passed a shrine visitor with his family at the entrance. So near closing time, there were no signs of other people. He paid the entrance fee at the reception desk and stepped within.

Cool air wrapped around his body.

No lights were on inside the temple. The florescent lights that ordinarily illuminated the temple had been turned off now that so few visitors remained.

Red light from the setting sun splayed into the temple through the latticed windows.

He paused with the sun against his cheek. The dozen or so [Tempyou-Era](#) buddhas seemed to look down at him through the dimness.

He moved to stand directly in front of [Fukukenjaku Kannon](#) , the principle buddha of the Hall of the Third Month. He quietly closed his eyes as he

pressed his hands together.

He could hear the chirps of evening cicadas.

There were no other sounds.

Separating his hands, Naoe looked up once more.

To confront these enormous buddhas alone in an empty temple was a terrifying thing. He had heard the Hall of the Third Month contemptuously dismissed as a 'museum of stuffed buddhas', but it was not so for him. On the contrary, to stand alone in front of these exalted beings was to brace his heart against an overwhelming terror.

He stood frozen in place, his innermost heart naked and exposed, feeling almost as if he were being cross-examined.

Why have you come here?

What are you doing?

All of them demanding answers of him at once.

He was barely able to suppress the impulse to run out of the temple. At the same time, he wanted to prostrate himself before them and confess all that was hidden within his heart. But to do so did not mean that one would be saved. That, he knew quite well.

The buddhas' salvation...

(Probably a thing born out of nothing but our foolish delusions...)

Naoe softly cast down his eyes.

The buddhas' salvation... A thing that was probably, in truth—

A distant longing eternally beyond his reach.

He felt as if there were always someone waiting for him here.

A bodhisattva stood on each side of [Fukukenjaku Kannon](#) . It was these bodhisattvas that he came time and again to see.

The bodhisattva facing him on his left was the [Moonlight Bodhisattva](#) , and to his right was the [Sunlight Bodhisattva](#) . There was majesty in their gentle forms, but they also somehow evoked nostalgia. The [Fukukenjaku Kannon](#) looked quietly down at him with a supreme dignity that gently removed all terror from the trembling beings of the world.

They were white flames to his eyes.

Two white flames rising toward the sky.

A face inevitably appeared in his mind each time he came to see this bodhisattva. No, the reverse was true: he came here in order to see her.

The face he saw in that of the bodhisattva belonged to the woman who had saved him.

(Minako...)

Hers alone.

He first met her in the midst of those days of carnage thirty years ago. Everything began when they saved Minako and her family, engulfed like so many others by Oda's schemes. Then, as Kagetora went through countless battles to protect them—in no time at all and all unawares, he and Minako fell in love.

She had been a woman with lovely eyes and strength at her core. And she had possessed an extraordinarily broad mind, that to be with her was to feel one's mind at ease.

In those torturous days of endless battle, it was Kagetora who doubtlessly suffered the most out of any of them. His family had been murdered, and the war had engulfed people with no connection to it at all. With no place of refuge, he could only let himself be crushed by the battle. He could not do things over again, could not find healing for his wounded heart. The only path remaining to him was to continue fighting the endless war, cradling his own worn and weary soul.

How precious must Minako's existence have been to him then? That one small peace in the midst of tension and impatience, bloodlust and terror; how cherished must the 'peace' Minako gave him have been? That meager kindness, that small love which could be lost with such terrifying ease in the midst of those brutal days of violently raging battle—how irreplaceable must Minako's existence have been to him? The healing he found for his heart—



How much must he have loved her—?

He, more than anyone, should have known these things. He, who knew Kagetora's pain better than anyone. And yet he had been unable to save him. On the contrary, he had driven Kagetora to the edge. As Kagetora's protector, as a member of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#), it had been his duty to see Oda destroyed. Otherwise their existence had no meaning.

He could not avert his eyes, could not turn away. He could not allow his master to run away.

As his vassal...

He was the one who should protect Kagetora—why was he only able to drive him into a corner? He was the one who sought more fervently than anyone to save Kagetora—why was he only able to cause him pain? He didn't understand. And without understanding, he fought blindly— He could not allow Kagetora to abandon the mission. There was nothing he could do but to continue to hurting him. When was it Kagetora began to hate him? He, who had walked at Kagetora's side for four hundred years as his confidant and trusted vassal—he was the one Kagetora came to hate more than any other.

He struggled with the dilemma under a façade of serenity. Though Kagetora might hate him, it was for his sake, he thought; any vassal would naturally come to the same conclusion.

And so he pretended not to notice Kagetora's anguish even as he watched

quietly over Kagetora's love for Minako there at his side...

He realized now that he had only been waiting for the time when everything would reach and exceed its limit.

Naoe sighed and turned his gaze away from the [Moonlight Bodhisattva](#) .

Kagetora had foreseen the intensification of the battle into all-out war and known that he could no longer protect even Minako.

That night, Kagetora called Naoe to him in order to confide in him a single decision.

*"Take Minako and go far away."*

At that point the difference in battle-strength created by Naoe's departure would likely have been fatal, but Kagetora, placing Minako's protection above all else, had dared it and commanded it. Or perhaps the truth was that Kagetora had already steeled himself to make a final strike at Nobunaga.

And thinking back on it now—

Kagetora had been trying to hold back Naoe's transformation by sending him far away, by giving him the command to 'protect Minako'. Perhaps Kagetora had meant to show Naoe his standing by doing so—and yet it had been a miscalculation more than anything else.

Minako was Kagetora's beloved.

If he had been aware of Naoe's agony, he would certainly have

understood that at that time, Minako was the one Naoe hated more than any other.

He should have guessed it from just a fragment of Naoe's wild speech and conduct.

Violent conflict had worn away the tenacious reason holding Naoe in check. He could no longer suppress the emotions boiling up inside him.

He hated Minako.

Hated her more than anything.

If only this woman were not here, he thought. He wanted to tear this woman Kagetora loved to pieces.

Jealously scorched his heart...

Minako's appearance only served to light a fire beneath those feelings.

Feelings that would in all likelihood drive him away. He would lose this person at whose side he had journeyed through four hundred years.

No matter whom Kagetora loved, he had no choice but to come back in the

end. No matter how much he loved that person, she would someday die.

There would come a time when they would part. And only he would remain in the end.

That was why it didn't matter, he argued himself down. Even if he could not have that which he truly desired, the day would come again when he would be the most important person in Kagetora's life. He should bear

it for a little while. Because he was the one who would be at Kagetora's side in the end...

He would bear it for a little while longer. He had borne it thus far, after all. He could do it—there was no reason why he couldn't. And yet.

Why did he want this person so much, right this instant?!

That foolish self-confidence: his fatal flaw even then.

He saw himself, the person who could arouse nothing in Kagetora but hatred.

Minako had not needed to smash through any barriers to bind herself to Kagetora. —He could...only envy that gentleness and empathy in Kagetora's beloved Minako.

(Though he should have known the danger...)

And yet, he dared to put Minako under Naoe's protection—

(Because even at the last, at the end of everything, he still trusted me...)

Even that fact had eluded his understanding. He had betrayed even that last remaining bit of trust.

And he had screamed Kagetora's name in the deepest depths of his heart as he ravaged Minako's body.

Because he hated Minako? No, his feelings ran deeper than that—so much deeper.

Anything would do. Anything connected to *him* that he could grasp with his

own hands, in any way. It didn't have to be Minako... No, *because* she was his beloved Minako—

He wanted her.

Even for a moment. Even this vanishing amount. Even that which Kagetora had given to another. Even the splinters. What he could not have, what was beyond his reach—

*His* love—*his* heart. He wanted to plundered them from this soul.

He had warned himself times beyond counting. That he was only confused. That this insanity, that this jealousy wearing him to the bone was only delusion. That these feelings were not real. That he should not have them at all.

And yet—

He could no longer deceive himself. No matter how savagely he struggled to delude himself, he could not make these feelings disappear...!

It was Kagetora his arms wanted...sought in their insane desire. For him, whose very life was borrowed, Kagetora *was* life.

*I love you*—he violated Kagetora within his heart even as he screamed those words.

He had already lost any semblance of a rational mind. He wanted someone to tell him—he wanted someone to explain to him this ugly form he now wore, these emotions, this madness. He wanted someone to tell him the true nature of this violent insanity that was destroying him, body and

mind.

He prayed for light to guide him out of this endlessly storming night.

Only that...

Several months after Oda's attack.

He and Minako had been captured as bait for Kagetora. And Kagetora came—came to save them even while knowing it to be a trap—and there he died, sacrificing his own body to protect them.

There had been no other way.

A soul stripped of its body was as defenseless as a warrior without his armor. The soul had no control whatsoever over its <<power>> without the support provided by the body.

And Nobunaga's <<hakonha >> would most certainly have destroyed Kagetora's soul.

He used that abominable power before he could hesitate.

Used the power Kenshin had granted to him alone: the power given to Kagetora's protector to force kanshou on another person.

Otherwise, Kagetora's soul would be destroyed by Nobunaga. That alone he could not allow. In the crux of that cataclysmic moment there was only one body he could use for the host. There was no other way.

Kagetora was the one person he could not lose. Would not lose. The one person he didn't want to lose, then and now and ever...

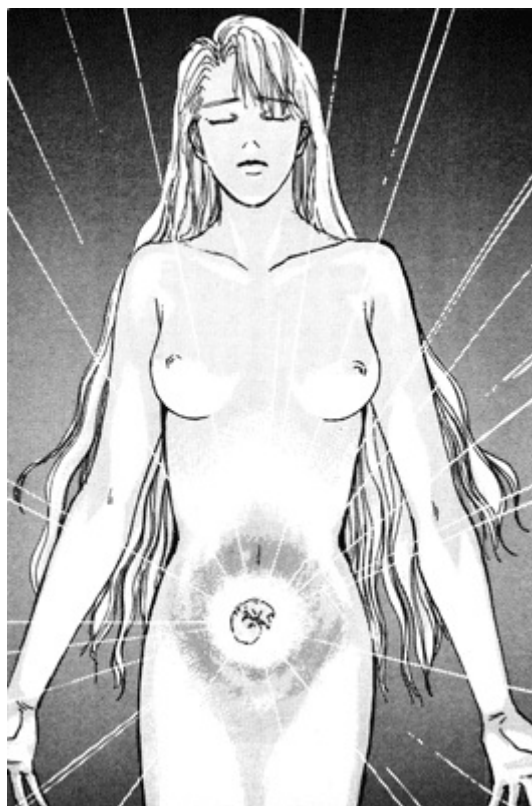
Would not lose...!

No other way, no other choice.

Only this.

To force Kagetora into Minako's body.

*"You alone I shall never forgive for all of eternity."*



It was time for the Hall of the Third Month to close. He left the temple and wandered around the park for a little while before climbing the stone steps of the Hall of the Second Month nearby. He had

concluded his shrine visit from the front, so now he turned to the view behind him. From this westward-facing platform he had an unbroken view of [Nara City](#) below.

The platform was quiet.

None of the temple visitors spoke. There were lovers there, married couples, friends. But no one said a word. Perhaps all of them were immersed in their own thoughts. They only gazed quietly at the descending sun. The sun touched the horizon.

Naoe, too, looked at the western sky.

He suddenly heard again the only thing Minako had said to him that night like a whisper in his heart.

Minako, who should have hated him as she hated no one else—had been the only one to understand.

She alone had understood these helpless feelings.

And thinking on it now, he knew that it had surely been—

Because she had carried these same profound feelings—

For the same person.

The sky gradually transformed after the sun disappeared below the horizon. Stripes of red light burned through the cloud-split space near the mountain ridges, and the surrounding clouds were scorched orange,



then crimson. That deep scarlet eventually suffused the sky, staining the lingering clouds purplish red and painting an unearthly beautiful scene before them.

Magenta clouds drifted towards the west. Several birds flew across the boundlessly magnificent sky.

For a brief moment Naoe forgot all language, and was left with only a desire to press his hands together in prayer in that majestic afterglow.

The ancient builders of this temple who had chosen this spot had surely known the Pure Lands, that paradise of the buddhas which the people of the transient world, exhausted from their prayers for forgiveness for their sins, could only glimpse for the barest moments. He stood within one of those moments.

The maddening feelings crushed to death by guilt and regret were gradually coming back to life. He had known from the day of their reunion that those desolate passions that he had been convinced were delusions, that he had told himself were delusions, would someday overflow from his heart and spill out in a brilliant, unstoppable flood.

Even if he could never again see a sky such as this...

The overwhelming, heart-striking beauty of this moment had been scorched into his soul...

Here.

I want to be with you, here.

He wanted to pray to that last fading light.

Wanted simply to pray, forgetting even the capacity for tears.

This sky...

So like my love for you.

Brilliant neon lights began to come aglow in [Nara](#) as the sky darkened.

The lanterns of the Hall of the Second Month were lit. Naoe left the visitors still enjoying the night view and took the covered walkway to the mild path along the right-hand wall.

Turning, he looked up once more at the gentle light of the temple lanterns glowing in the darkness, then headed down the dim, unlit path.

Emerging next to the brilliantly-illuminated Great Buddha Hall, he passed through the Great Southern Gate and came out onto a street filled with the lights of cars moving back and forth, from whence he retraced his steps towards the hotel.

The possibility of a connection between this odd case of fireballs appearing in the city and the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> was not small. An investigation would probably bring the cause to light.

(Will we be able to depend on Kage-tora-sama's power...?)

That worry ranked first and foremost in Naoe's mind. Still, he had shown

flawless skill in the <<choubuku >> of Ashina Moriuji and company in Tokyo, and there had been no indication of that

<<power>> fading afterwards. His <<powers>>

seemed to have more or less stabilized after their awakening in Sendai . But at the same time...

*"It's only a matter of time before Kagetora regains his memories."*

Kousaka's words pressed against his chest.

If this was a path he could not avoid no matter how much he struggled, then he had no choice but to move forward. He could not take back the past.

Naoe had made up his mind during those few days he had spent with Kagetora in Sendai and Tokyo.

He would not run away from Kagetora a second time. He could not protect him while indulging such irresolute feelings. He was the only one who could protect him, and protect him he would. That was his one and only conceit. No matter how vile his character, those words alone he would declare with pride before the gods themselves.

Back at the hotel, he directed his steps towards the front desk. A familiar well-built young man stood there, looking like he, too, had returned just moments before.

And the youth standing beside him—

He spotted Naoe, and an "ah!" of recognition appeared on his face.

Though he looked surprised, he gave Naoe a slight, awkward smile.

"Hey, you got here pretty quick."

A peaceful smile found its way to Naoe's face at last.

"Welcome back, Takaya-san."

To protect this person—

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## Chapter 4: Hiragumo

It was

around seven-thirty when Takaya and Chiaki returned to the hotel after completing their investigation. Making food the first order of business, they went up to the Japanese restaurant on the top floor of the hotel.

Naoe interrupted their report to ask, "Possessed by the 'Hiragumo' ...?"

"Yeah," Chiaki responded, tossing a piece of sashimi into his mouth. "I'm sure of it, Naoe—the *tsukumogami* attached to Shiohara's daughter is the 'Hiragumo'. That's why I said that dealing with it ain't gonna be as simple as your everyday exorcism."

"If the 'Hiragumo' is involved, then *Matsunaga Hisahide* must be as well?"

"Why the heck do you keep saying that?" Takaya demanded with annoyed incomprehension, poking at the sashimi garnish. "Why does the 'Hiragumo' mean *Matsunaga Hisahide* must be involved? And what the heck is a tea kettle *tsukumogami*, anyway? Can't you guys stop talking gibberish for five minutes and explain it to me?"

Takaya was peeved because Chiaki hadn't given him any sort of a clear answer. Naoe, who had more or less assumed the position of

explainer-in-chief, replied patiently, "The 'Hiragumo' was once one of the rarest of tea kettles. It later became a *tsukumogami*, a famous monster that would appear around Heguri at the foot of *Mt. Shigi* .

If I'm not mistaken, legend has it that although it became a monster

with its own arms and legs, because it was originally a tea kettle, it would appear in people's kitchens in the dead of night and drink all the water in jars and urns and bottles and other containers while insisting 'make tea! make tea!' Stories also say that it will eat evil spirits and other monsters, so people believed that it should be left alone and treated with respect. There were apparently also those who set out an extra bottle of water especially for the 'Hiragumo'..." Naoe clasped his hands together on the table. "But when the 'Hiragumo' was still an ordinary tea kettle, its owner was Yamato commander Matsunaga Hisahide."

"The 'Hiragumo' belonged to Hisahide?"

"Yes. You said the victim lived near Mt. Shigi?"

"Yeah...?"

Naoe leaned forward slightly.

"Mt. Shigi was where Matsunaga Danjou Hisahide's main castle was located. It fell to attack by Oda's army after he rebelled. The story goes that Nobunaga suggested that Hisahide hand over to him the masterpiece 'Hiragumo Kettle,' which he also coveted, and in exchange he would spare Hisahide's life. But Hisahide refused, instead tying the 'Hiragumo' around his neck, sprinkling himself with gunpowder, and personally lighting the fuse to set off the explosion."

Takaya gulped down a piece of sashimi and muttered, "So he blew himself up with the kettle, huh...?"

"Yes," Naoe nodded.

Chiaki set down his chopsticks and groaned. "That's probably when the bitterness and resentment of Matsunaga's soldiers collected in the 'Hiragumo Kettle.' The malice of the dead soldiers resurrected the 'Hiragumo ' as a tsukumogami ." Chiaki sighed. "Matsunaga Danjou Hisahide . Who killed the Shogun and his own lord and reduced the Toudai Temple to ashes—what a traitorous, heinous, inhuman bastard. I hear he hooked

up with that idiot Nobunaga, then double-crossed him—it's no wonder he became an onryou ."

Naoe added quietly to Takaya, "Rumors say Matsunaga Hisahide has set out to unify the territories near the old capital. There is no definitive proof that he actually has any sort of secret weapon, but I have heard that the Oda forces are very much on guard against it. They appear to think it has some kind of unthinkable power."

Takaya scowled. "A secret weapon? They can't mean this 'Hiragumo ' monster, can they...?"

"Well, there's certainly merit to making sure. And we still don't know what connection it has to the 'hoihoi fire' either."

"I got the feeling somebody was watching us."

Naoe asked, "Who?"

"Probably some onshou from somewhere," Chiaki said, stuffing tempura into his mouth. "But

anyway, let's leave that for tomorrow. Argh, geez, I'm totally worn out from having to protect the helpless guy who can't protect himself."

"Who're you calling helpless?"

"You should at least offer to gimme a hand from time to time."

"Are you saying that I haven't?!"

"All right, all right." Takaya's lips tightened in annoyance as Naoe held him back. They appeared to have passed the entire day this way. Naoe was glad yet again that he had arrived early.

"You'd better at least make sure you don't get my way."

"Yeah, thanks for nothing!"

Naoe dropped his face into his hand and groaned.

Physically drained by the unaccustomed heat, both Takaya and Chiaki retired to their room and went to bed early that night. They had carried out a good investigation despite their bickering, and Naoe was surprised at how well they worked together. Still—

"So you decided to ride with me after all?" Naoe commented, glancing at Takaya in the passenger's seat.

The next day. They had left the hotel that morning in Naoe's rented Presia.

"You drive better, at least."

"Hmm? So you trust my driving?"



"You try sitting in a car the whole day with Chiaki driving sometime. It's hell! And the scare ain't the fun kind you get in a roller coaster, either!"

Takaya was feeling like he should be thanking the gods for making it back alive.

"Bishamonten would surely protect you?"

"Yeah, sure. Anyway, I've decided."

Looking at Takaya's suddenly serious face, Naoe asked, "About what?"

"That I'm getting my license as soon as I turn eighteen next year. If I'm teamed up with Chiaki again I'm not gonna even let him touch the wheel."

"Please stop. Now you're scaring me."

The car drove due south down National Highway 24. They had split up with Chiaki for the time being; he was heading for Sangou Town to meet with Shiohara's daughter, Nagi, while their destination was the

residence of Shiohara's lover, Kizaki Mieko, in Takada City, where they were planning to ask her some additional questions about the circumstances of Shiohara's death.

"Is it all right for us to just show up like this?"

"When I called her establishment, they told me that she's taking a few days off. She would be heading out in the evening even if she were going to work, so she should probably be home now."

"Have you actually contacted her?"

"I got a recording saying that she was not at home. But I believe she is. According to her colleagues, she was quite upset at Shiohara's sudden death. It seems that she was partially intoxicated at yesterday's funeral as well."

Takaya scowled up at the roof.

"So she's an alcoholic? Geez, I hate that..."

"Then perhaps you should have gone with Nagahide."

"No way!" Takaya said flatly, looking for a moment at Naoe's conscientious handling of the wheel. The driving was a part of it, but having Naoe beside him was also calming somehow.

(Well, that's a given when compared to Chiaki.)

"What is it?"

"Ah, nothing. Anyway, can you tell me a bit more about this [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) you were talking about?"

Naoe searched his memory for a moment.

"[Matsunaga Hisahide](#) was originally a vassal of the Miyoshi family, which had the Ashikaga

Shogunate under its thumb. Rumors say that he murdered the son of [Miyoshi Nagayoshi](#), who was head of the family, and drove the then-Shogun, [Ashikaga Yoshiteru](#), to suicide. Because of that he was denounced by society for betraying his masters. He attempted to conquer

Yamato and its surrounding territories from his stronghold at Mt. Shigi . He also fought with his former masters of the Miyoshi Clan and attacked the Miyoshi Triumvirate 's camp at Toudai Temple . The Matsunaga army burned Toudai Temple to ashes and destroyed even the Great Buddha Hall."

"Toudai Temple —"that" Toudai Temple ?"

"Yes. One of Hisahide's strongholds, Tamon Castle , was located north of there. In any case, he eventually lost the castle

when he surrendered to Oda's forces. That's when Hisahide began serving

Nobunaga. He participated in several of Nobunaga's battles, like the attack on Ishiyama Hongan Temple , but rose against Nobunaga a few years later. In the end he secluded himself at Mt. Shigi , where he was besieged by the Oda army and destroyed."

"So that's what that story of the 'Hiragumo ' kettle from last night was about?"

"Yes. Hisahide was certainly a man of refined taste. He had a zeal for collecting rare swords and tea utensils—a trait which Nobunaga shared. But in Hisahide's case, it was an enthusiasm bordering on obsession."

Naoe took note of the passing street signs, then continued, "I heard that when Hisahide entered the capital to surrender to Nobunaga, he presented to Nobunaga a masterpiece in the form of a tea caddy called the 'Tsukumogami '.

Thereafter he presented several more rare tea utensils to Nobunaga in order to express his continued loyalty, but it must doubtlessly have been painful for Hisahide to give away so much of his beloved

collection. Well, I suppose it was necessary for him to survive, but...in the end he chose to be blown to pieces with the 'Hiragumo'—"

"What, so it was actually a tea kettle?"

"It was a masterpiece among masterpieces, long coveted by Nobunaga. When Nobunaga besieged Mt. Shigi, he promised Hisahide his life in exchange for the 'Hiragumo'. Hisahide stubbornly refused. Choosing destruction with the 'Hiragumo' over submission must have been his expression of defiance towards Nobunaga."

"Mmm," Takaya nodded. "He was some character, huh? I can understand how he felt, though..."

"Hisahide was quite a cunning scoundrel. He made a show of obeying Nobunaga, but in actuality was constantly plotting rebellion against the man who had so quickly usurped what little central power he managed to grasp. His hatred for Nobunaga must have been considerable," Naoe explained, his gaze moving back to the road.

"Nobunaga was a man whose charm inspired lasting loyalty, but he also inspired hatred in equal measure. Perhaps Hisahide's fear of Nobunaga spurred him in his rebellion."

"..."

"Nobunaga was, without question, the favored child of his era. Whether in a good sense or in a bad sense, I do feel some sympathy for Hisahide and the others who were driven to rebel against him. Although," Naoe added with a small smile, "they would spurn any such useless sentiment."

Takaya looked at Naoe with some disappointment. "You're gonna sing Nobunaga's praises even though he's our enemy?"

"If he had not existed, then this country would probably also not exist in its current form." Naoe met Takaya's gaze. "You cannot deny the tremendous service he performed for this country in its evolution. Though he is without question our enemy, we should also recognize his achievements. —If we wish to affirm our current society, that is."

Takaya looked hard at Naoe.

Naoe continued, "But if you take it even further, perhaps there really isn't anyone who was not necessary to the creation of our current world, irrespective of whether or not their names are remembered by history."

"Naoe..."

"A small saving grace, don't you think?" Naoe said, and smiled quietly. Takaya, gazing at his profile, closed his mouth.

The car crossed open expanses of blue-glinting rice paddies as it raced southward.

The address Chiaki had obtained during their investigation belonged to a pretty three-story brick building. Takaya and Naoe alighted in front of it and entered. As they approached the woman's door, Takaya asked, "So how should we introduce ourselves, anyway? Are you gonna do the

same thing Chiaki did and give her a magazine reporter's business card?"

"We'll use this."

Takaya looked at the notebook Naoe held out to him and stopped in place.

"What the—a police notebook? Wh-why the heck do you have that thing? Is that a counterfeit...?!"

"It's the real thing."

"You stole it?!"

"I picked it up."

"Aaaaagh, geez, you know—!"

Naoe rang the doorbell, an innocent expression on his face.

No one answered. He rang several more times in between pauses, but there was no response.

"Maybe she's sleeping?"

He continued insistently. Only after three or so more tries did someone answer at last.

"Who the hell is that? Shut up...!"

The door finally opened a crack, and a face peered out at them—it was the young woman Takaya had seen at the funeral yesterday, Kizaki Mieko.

Her long disheveled hair was caught in a net today, and she wore only a

single-layered shirt over an extremely distracting figure.

She demanded sullenly, "Who are you?"

"We apologize for disturbing your rest. We are here on an investigation—"

Naoe showed her the police notebook, and Mieko was abruptly fully awake

"In-investigation!" She gave a small scream, and her entire attitude immediately changed.

After hurriedly tidying up the empty whiskey bottles rolling on the table, Mieko showed Naoe and Takaya inside.

"P-please..."

"Thank you."

The scent of alcohol lingered in the room. Naoe glanced at Takaya's scowl and quietly began the questioning.

"I'm going to come straight to the point—we would like to ask you some questions about Shiohara-shi."

Mieko still appeared to be slightly intoxicated, as well as dazed and confused from shock and distress. Naoe began with some harmless questions.

"Your relationship to Shiohara-shi was..." he trailed off, noticing that Mieko was staring dubiously at Takaya next to him.

"Ah, I apologize for the lack of introduction. This is Ougi-san, who is

collaborating with me in this investigation. I am Tachibana from the Special Investigations Department of the National Police Agency."

"Ah..."

"I am the detective in charge of this unique case, so please feel free to tell me anything that has been bothering you, even those things that may defy common sense or would be difficult to explain to the average person. Anything at all. Even what you may consider unbelievable, such as spirit-murderers or curse-killings; these things may very well be the key to solving the crime."

There was surprise in Mieko's expression, but also trust. Takaya gave him a suspicious look; Naoe ventured to ignore him.

"Things like being haunted to death by fox spirits or being killed by vengeful ghosts—" he added, looking at Mieko. "Or being burned to death by mysterious fireballs."

"!"

Mieko's expression changed drastically.

"M-Mr. Detective!"

A muffled *ack ack* suggested that Takaya was in imminent danger of losing his battle against laughter. But Mieko shrieked in complete seriousness, "He...he was murdered. He was cursed to death by that daughter of his!"



"Cursed to death...?"

"Those fireballs were her curse. He's been terrified for a while now, and he told me, 'I'm going to be killed. My daughter put a curse on me.' He carried dozens of charms with him all the time. It was his daughter's curse!"

Takaya and Naoe looked at each other. Mieko pressed desperately, "It happened just like he said! 'I'm going to be killed by the Dragon God. My daughter put a curse on me to have the Dragon God kill me.'"

"Dragon God...?"

"Yes! His daughter made a hundred pilgrimages to see the Dragon God, praying for his death every time. And the Dragon God answered. The Dragon God killed him!" Mieko insisted, and began sobbing loudly. Naoe looked at Takaya. Takaya leaned forward, eyes cool.

"Then Shiohara-san knew that he would be killed?"

Mieko nodded, still crying.

"And you're saying that it was because his daughter cursed him."

Mieko continued nodding.

"Which means that Shiohara-san was somehow aware that his daughter was casting a death-curse on him?"

"...!"

Mieko's face changed color as she looked at them.

Naoe requested calmly, "Please tell us about Shiohara-san and his daughter Nagi-san."

Meanwhile, Chiaki Shuuhei was trying to see Nagi at her home in Sangou Town.

She had lived there with her stepfather, but would now be living alone. Ordinarily only a housekeeper stayed at the house, but for the past few days her great-aunt and great-uncle, who had come for the funeral, had also been staying with her. He had called her under pretense of collecting information for a magazine article to attempt to set up a meeting, but had been completely and commendably shut out by a woman who'd presumably been the great-aunt.

(...Geez, it wouldn't've hurt to toss me a crumb or two,) he thought with annoyance. No doubt other reporters had come calling as well, so she had been unnecessarily brusque.

But since he couldn't leave without seeing Nagi, he was loitering aimlessly around the house...

(Well, what next?)

Nagi seemed to be home.

When he and Takaya returned yesterday evening to attempt to get in

contact with her, the concentration of <<malice>> had been quite out of the ordinary. Even now the house was cloaked by an extremely strong sense of ill-will.

And was it his imagination, or was it much stronger?

(Is it because of that kettle monster?)

If that was the case, then the 'Hiragumo' had grown even stronger.

(But for now we have to find the connection between it and the hoihoi fire...

As he groaned, still stuck on the question of how to approach her—

"...!"

A strange aura moved near him. He immediately put himself on guard.

(Who is that?)

He focused his mind and scanned his surroundings with deep caution. Someone was watching him. This sensation—

(It's the same as yesterday...)

Chiaki raised the sensitivity of his spirit sensing to pinpoint the source of that aura, but at that moment the door

opened, and Nagi herself appeared with a rather pitiful little "See you later."

"!"

Chiaki's eyes widened in surprise, and he whirled. The feeling of being

watched had increased exponentially in intensity. 'Energy' gathered around the unseen, alien presence, so immense that it warped the air. Chiaki recognized the danger in a split-second.

(Shit...!)

Hard on the heels of that thought, power like an unseen storm swooped down on Nagi. It flashed around her, and in the next instant shattered all the windows in the house!

"Kyaaaah!" Nagi screamed, cowering with her arms around her head.

Small branches snapped off from the surrounding trees. A pine's trunk split apart with a loud crack. A sudden gale howled in the small space around them. Who...?!

"!"

Fissures appeared in the ground and raced toward Nagi from all directions with terrifying speed!

"Bastard!"

Chiaki promptly created a <<goshinha >> and threw it around Nagi. It stopped the fissures with a metallic clang a second before they reached her.



(Someone's attacking her?!)

Then—another burst of bloodlust!

(Dammit!)

Chiaki dashed toward Nagi where she crouched just outside the door. He searched for his opponent with narrowed, dagger-edged eyes—and the aura dissipated. Whoever it was, he seemed unwilling to go up against Chiaki.

"!"

Chiaki did not miss the silhouette that flickered at the opposite street corner.

(There...!)

"Ugh...!"

Nagi's moan stopped Chiaki from chasing after it. Damn. She appeared to have been struck by the glass shards. Chiaki turned to Nagi, clicking his tongue in disgust as the aura receded.

Nagi was trembling violently in pain. Chiaki swept the surrounding area with sharp caution once more, but that ferocious aura which had unleashed such furious power on her was gone for the moment.

(He's run off?)

His brows knitted in a frown, but there was nothing he could do. Chiaki took Nagi's right arm, which had covered her face, and examined her wound. Fresh blood trickled out of a deep cut, staining the hand pressed against it scarlet.

"Damn. This'll probably need stitches."

"..."

Forgetting her injuries for a moment, Nagi stared at the strange young man who had suddenly appeared in front of her.

"U...um..."

"Nagi!"

The door was thrown open, and Nagi's great-aunt and great-uncle came flying out. Her great-aunt screamed at the sight of Nagi's wound.

"Nagi! Are you all right?"

"Wh-who are you?! What did you do to...?!"

"Stop making a fuss, Mister. This cut is pretty bad, so you should get her to the hospital," Chiaki interrupted, quickly taking off his shirt and tying it tightly around Nagi's arm to stem the flow of blood. He looked around. "Is the hospital close by? I can take her in my car if you want..."

"Yo-you're from the media, aren't you?! Go away! How many times do I have to tell you people that you're being a bother...?!"

"Sure, I can leave, but you really need to get this wound looked at."

Nagi, who had been staring dazedly at Chiaki, suddenly cried out, "Wait! Wait, don't go! Ah..." Chiaki turned to look at her. Nagi flinched a bit at her own words, but after a moment pleaded in a small voice, "Please...take me to the hospital..."

Chiaki's eyes widened.

He had somehow ended up becoming Nagi's guardian. Her astonished great-aunt and great-uncle had been definitively cut off by her request to have Chiaki take her to the hospital.

Hunched over with his chin in his hand, Chiaki waited for Nagi in one of the chairs arranged in long rows in the hospital waiting area.

(Maybe they don't get along...?)

According to Aoki, the marriage between Nagi's mother, Yukiko, and her true father, Tooru, had been opposed by everyone around them. They had

eloped and gotten married despite that fact, but upon Tooru's sudden death, Yukiko had had no choice but to take Nagi with her back to her family. Nagi had been six at the time.

Yukiko had married Shiohara Kouzou four years ago. Nagi's grandfather, who had approved of his abilities, had adopted Kouzou into the family upon his marriage as heir to his company.

Her grandfather had died three years ago. Kouzou had succeeded him and been inaugurated as the president of the company in accordance with his will.

(Maybe this is why they don't get along...?)

If Yukiko had never returned, the company would have fallen into the hands of Nagi's great-aunt (her grandfather's younger sister) and great-uncle.

(Could that be why they're taking it out on the girl?)

But they were the ones who stood to profit the most from Shiohara's death...

(Aah, this is not helping), Chiaki shrugged. There was trouble enough to go around even without these messy family affairs.



(But people have really been dying left and right in this family, huh...?)

Three in as many years—four, counting Nagi's father. Both of Nagi's birth parents as well as her stepfather.

(Is there something here?) he wondered, head tilted doubtfully, when the door of the examination room opened.

Nagi appeared with her right arm bandaged and hanging in a white cloth sling.

"Ah..."

He looked up. Nagi gave him a small smile, looking at him with all the uncertainty of an elementary school student trying to gauge her parents' expressions after playing a prank.

"...I'm sorry. I'm finished now," she told him.

"Well done."

A middle-aged doctor in a white coat came out behind her. "Aah, hello.

Are you her brother?" Playing along for the moment, Chiaki answered in the affirmative, and the doctor continued, "The wound was deep enough to require three stitches. There will probably be a slight scar, but it won't be terribly conspicuous. She should not take a bath today."

"I see."

"It'll probably start hurting this evening, so I've given her some painkillers. I'll examine her again tomorrow, so please come see me

then."

"Okay. Thank you so much."

Chiaki bowed his head deeply to the doctor as he returned to his examination room, then turned to Nagi. She looked at him timidly, piteously dazed in her snowy bandages.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Um..."

Someone called his name at the window, interrupting whatever Nagi was about to say. Chiaki paid the bill there and returned carefully carrying a bag of medicine. He passed it to Nagi.

"Here. Let's get you home."

They left the hospital and walked side by side beneath the blazing sun.

A chorus of a dozen or so cicadas chirped loudly somewhere nearby. The asphalt-paved hill road shimmered in the heat. It was another cloudless summer day.

"You're Nagi-san, right? Is that the first time something like that's happened to you?"

Nagi seemed bewildered by Chiaki's question; she shook her head and bit her lip dejectedly before replying in a small voice, "Actually..."

"?"

"That wasn't the first time. It's been happening a lot lately..."

Chiaki stared at her in surprise.

"Then..."

"The windows would break without warning, the house would start shaking, I'd almost get hit by runaway cars...I've become too afraid to leave the house— And my stepfather died so suddenly, too..." Nagi stopped in her tracks, looking down at the ground. "The lady said something about a curse...I..." Nagi covered her face with her hands. "I don't know anything anymore..."

Chiaki looked down at Nagi, scowling.

(Is someone trying to kill her?)

Who was behind it? The person he'd seen earlier—was he targeting this girl? Or—

(Is the target the 'Hiragumo'?)

Chiaki took another look at Nagi. Yesterday he hadn't been able to see its shape clearly, but—

The tsukumogami hiding within Nagi's body.

She didn't seem to be aware of it.

(Who was it?)

Chiaki grimaced.

If nothing else, they had to protect this girl. And if her attacker from earlier had been aiming for the 'Hiragumo ', then they had to remove her from this place, or she would become involved sooner or later.

(But how?)

Nagi bit her lip as Chiaki pondered the problem. Seeing her pleading, hopeless expression, Chiaki patted her back encouragingly.

"Cheer up, everything'll be fine. I swear I won't let you get hurt next time."

"Eh?"

"That was my bad earlier. I was too careless. I totally should've been able to protect you from that. It was my fault for letting you get hurt, so I'm sorry, okay?"

Nagi peered at Chiaki wonderingly.

"You...protected me?"

"Though 'a step too late' would be more accurate, yeah."

"Then, then..." Nagi's eyes lighted up. "Are you a servant of the Dragon God?"

Chiaki's eyes widened involuntarily.

"Huh...?"

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## Chapter 5: Defense Ridge

Chiaki was accompanying Nagi on a visit to 'Shigi's Bishamon-san,' also known as the famous Chougosonshi Temple of Mt. Shigi . It was a large temple in which great numbers of the faithful gathered to pay homage to Heavenly King Bishamonten . It had originally been built by Prince Shoutoku halfway up Mt. Shigi , in the place where Bishamonten first appeared in Japan, and later revived by Holy Priest Myouren in the Heian Era . Even today it was teeming with worshippers; in the Month, Year, and Day of the Tiger, when Bishamonten was said to have appeared, it would be filled to bursting with pilgrims from far and wide.

Chiaki sighed lightly at the line of specialty good fortune papier-mâché tiger charms in a shop outside the front door.

He had brought Nagi here at her insistence, but he still thought it rather odd for a girl to want to come to a temple.

Chiaki looked at Nagi as she started up the path to the shrine.

"Is this your first time here, Chiaki-san?"

"Eh?...Yeah," was the only answer Chiaki could give, though it wasn't strictly true. He could remember coming here many times a long, long time ago.

(Well, this temple *does* belong to Bishamonten .)

Takeda Shingen , too, had been a fervent believer, and had left behind a letter telling of his conversion.

Though Mt. Shigi was quite famous for its Chougosonshi Temple —

This was also where Matsunaga Hisahide had built his stronghold, Shigisan Castle .

The castle had apparently once stood on the opposite slope, but had been burnt to the ground with Chougosonshi Temple by enemy fire during Oda's attack. The temple was later rebuilt, but

the castle was abandoned, to be ravaged by time and weather until not single stone remained. In the modern age only traces of its excavation and scorched army rice had been found to mark the spot where the castle had once stood.

(Matsunaga Hisahide , huh...?)

Chiaki looked at Nagi, frowning slightly. Unmindful of her injuries, Nagi called out to Chiaki cheerfully, "This is the main temple. Watch your step."

"Ah, yes, right."

A large temple came into view as he ascended the flight of stone stairs, rising on a platform beside a perpendicular cliff. It was, of course, bustling with groups of tourists.

After paying their respects inside, they leaned against the guardrails of the platform and looked down on Sangou Town.

"My mom used to bring me here to this temple to worship, ever since I was little."

Chiaki's eyes abruptly swung to Nagi. Nagi smiled, enjoying the wind

against her face.

"We came so many times, just the two of us, that this temple is like my backyard."

"..."

"Oh, that's right!" Nagi suddenly pulled Chiaki by the arm towards the temple's charm stand. A row of multi-colored charms were on display.

"Ack!"

One of them was a familiar-looking tiger's head in profile, painted yellow with black stripes.

"Th-this isn't..."

"Isn't it neat? It's a **Tigers** charm. Chiaki-san, do you not like the **Tigers** ?"

"Huh? Ah...ahahahah..." Chiaki laughed convulsively.

Nagi told Chiaki as they took the flight of stairs back down, "My mom...died half a year ago." She looked down at the ground, loneliness in her expression, as Chiaki gazed at her. "After she got sick, she would keep saying, over and over again, 'I want to go back to our house, the house where your father is. I want to go back to the house where I could see the ocean.'"

"See the ocean...?"

"Yes. It was the house we lived in when I was little." Nagi gave Chiaki a small smile. "There's no ocean here in [Nara](#) , you see..."

Chiaki looked questioningly at her. "Nagi...?"

Nagi started walking ahead once more, staring down at the ground.

Chiaki, remembering the elopement and precipitous marriage of Nagi's parents and the early death of Nagi's father, grew pensive.

"I only have one dad. My dad is my only dad. My mom died because of that disgusting man." With her back turned, Nagi stated in a small but resolute voice, "It was his fault."

Startled, Chiaki's expression darkened. But Nagi turned to Chiaki and smiled again as if she had forgotten those words as soon as they left her lips.

"This road leads to the top of the mountain, and there's a temple called [Kuuuachi-san](#) there. Want to go?"

"[Kuuuachi-san](#) ...?"

"Yes. They would take this path to bring water up, because there's no water supply up there. Ladle an offering of water into this pot..."

Nagi said, passing Chiaki a tin pot from the many hanging by the wash fountain. She picked up the ladle and began pouring water into another.

"Wa-wait a minute. Are you really planning to climb to the summit? Carrying this?"

"Oh, you don't want to?"



"No, but you're injured. Stop for today. You need to rest."

"Oh... That's right."

Nagi took another look at the bandage around her right arm.

"You probably don't feel anything right now because of the anesthetic, but since you are injured, you should be careful...right?"

"I'm sorry. I got carried away," Nagi said brightly with a shy smile.

"I guess it's because I've been so nervous and scared lately, all the time."

"..."

"My great-aunt and relatives are always around. They're all scary, and I don't like them. They're always talking about the family fortune and the family name. My mom was really upset by it, too," Nagi confided, and turned to gaze at the mountain. "But it's okay. The Dragon God is with me. Chiaki-san, you're a servant of the Dragon God, aren't you? I've heard the divine message of the Dragon God: 'I will protect you, so be at peace.'"

"Divine message...?"

"Yes. The shrine of the Dragon God is up there. I go there a lot to pay my respects. And pray." Nagi turned to look at Chiaki. "Chiaki-san, you already know everything, don't you?"

"..."

Doubt filled Chiaki's face.

"So it's okay. I believe everything will be fine. I trust in the Dragon God."

"You..."

"Please protect me for now and always."

Nagi gave him a bright grin and walked on ahead.

She seemed to truly believe that Chiaki was a servant of the Dragon God. But what did she mean by hearing a divine message?

The Dragon God of [Mt. Shigi](#) ...

Chiaki suddenly froze in place, unable to breathe.

(She couldn't have...)

The sky darkened. Black clouds covered the sun overhead.

He could hear the roar of distant thunder.

The violent thunderstorm had passed by the time they arrived back at Nagi's house. A Presia was parked in front of it, and standing next to the car were Naoe and Takaya.

Chiaki climbed out and waved at Takaya.

"Hey. You guys out for a drive?"

"Huh, why doesn't it surprise me that you'd have a girl sitting next to you?"

Nagi alighted. Both Chiaki and Nagi were soaked from head to toe from the rain at the temple. Chiaki introduced them as his acquaintances, and Nagi gave them a slight bow.

"I'll bring a towel," she said, and walked off in the direction of the house. Chiaki presented a box to Takaya as he followed her with his eyes.

"Here. A souvenir from [Mt. Shigi](#) ."

"What is it?"

"A papier-mâché tiger."

"You trying to say something to me?!"

Next to him, Naoe murmured quietly, "So that's Shiohara's daughter?"

Chiaki's face turned serious again.

"Have you learned something?"

"Yes. There's certainly a strong <<malice>>—well, more of an alien presence than malice—here. As we suspected, that girl carries some sort of apparition within her."

"That '[Hiragumo](#) ' kettle thing...?"

"It's hiding itself, so I can't be certain, but from the strength of its aura, the **tsukumogami** is easily three—no, four hundred years old. It's only lurking within

the body at the moment, but trying to expel it directly will likely be a rather difficult proposition."

"Then the rumors are true as well...?"

Chiaki interrupted Takaya to ask, "What rumors?"

"Well, there was something that lady Kizaki told us, and we checked it out with the people in the neighborhood before you guys got back. That hoihoi fire thing? It's been showing up a lot around here too, and they've really been increasing in number these past few days. And people have seen them go into this house at night..."

The window Takaya indicated belonged to the first room on the second floor: Nagi's room.

"The fireballs are flocking here like there's something sucking 'em in. And the **tsukumogami** is pretty much our only suspect right now, right?"

"It's gathering the hoihoi fire? The kettle?"

"Naoe was thinking that it might be eating them up."

Chiaki looked at Naoe.

"You think that the '**Hiragumo** ' is consuming the 'energy' of the hoihoi fire to add to its own power?"

"Probably. According to legend, the 'Hiragumo '

feeds on spirits and other apparitions, right? Doesn't that mean that it's using spiritual and otherworldly energies to fuel its own growth?"

Chiaki's brows creased lightly.

The tsukumogami in Nagi had unquestionably grown since yesterday, but—

"Then why did the tsukumogami pick Nagi to possess? Are you saying that it has something to do with the hoihoi fire burning her stepfather to death?"

Takaya and Naoe looked at each other, and both of them grimaced. Naoe asked, gazing at the house, "Did you hear that she offered a hundred prayers in a hundred pilgrimages to Mt. Shigi ?"

"A hundred prayers...in a hundred pilgrimages...?"

"Yes. They say that she prayed a hundred times to the Dragon God at Chougosonshi Temple . Her prayers..." Naoe's eyes sharpened—"may have triggered the curse that killed her stepfather."

"A curse...? That killed Shiohara...?"

"It's not really something you can ask her directly, but Shiohara, at least, seemed to have believed it. In fact, ever since Shiohara learned of his daughter's hundred pilgrimages, he's had dreams of Nagi being followed about by a thick fog and of himself being devoured by the Dragon God—he was terrified."

He had plastered his room with charms and carried them with him at all times. His fear of Nagi had been such that he had avoided all contact

with her for the past few months.

Chiaki asked doubtfully, "I don't get it. She doesn't look like someone who could do that. And besides, why would she want to kill her stepfather? Are you saying she hated him that much?"

"Her mother died half a year ago, correct?" Naoe answered implacably. "She didn't die from any type of disease; she committed suicide from severe mental illness."

"Suicide...?"

"Yes. Her relationship with her husband was apparently not a congenial one. Which is not surprising, given that she was forced into the marriage by her father."

"In short, this guy Shiohara got himself adopted into the family because he had his eyes on the company and the family fortune. He never seemed to much care about actually having a family," Takaya interjected with disgust.

Naoe added, "That girl's mother apparently knew quite well that Shiohara had a lover. She lived with her neurotic disorder towards Shiohara and her family for years before she finally consumed poison half a year ago."

"So Nagi blames her stepfather for her mother's death...?"

Nagi's words suddenly echoed in the back of Chiaki's mind.

*"It's his fault."*

Even so, could Nagi really have done something as terrible as curse him to death?

"I'm not sure, but weren't the hundred pilgrimages to Mt. Shigi ? The once-upon location of Matsunaga Hisahide 's castle? If that kettle monster possessed her because of those visits, then there must be a connection, right?"

*"I have heard the divine message of the Dragon God..."*

Chiaki's eyes narrowed.

"Well, but—" Takaya added bluntly, "even if that monster has a connection to Matsunaga Hisahide , he hasn't made an appearance himself yet. We still haven't seen any sign of movement from the onshou , right?"

"No, that's not quite true.

They blinked and switched their attention to Chiaki.

"Someone is targeting Nagi. Judging by the <<power>> they used, I'm absolutely sure it's an onshou or <<nue >> of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

"!"

Takaya and Naoe's eyes both widened. The onshou were on the move...!

"Onshou ...? Could it have been Matsunaga Hisahide ?"

"No idea. But still, that wouldn't make sense if the monster possessing Nagi is actually the 'Hiragumo kettle' that once belonged to Hisahide. It's a

tsukumogami of considerable power. If Hisahide were resurrected, I'd think that he

would try to use it instead of destroying it out of hand, since there is already a bond between them. But if the onshou fighting Hisahide are aiming for the 'Hiragumo'..."

"His secret weapon..." Naoe took up the thread of the conversation. "So Hisahide's secret weapon would be this tsukumogami after all?"

"What?"

Naoe turned to Takaya. "Everything makes sense if it's the Oda who are attacking Shiohara Nagi. That 'Hiragumo' legend— If we handle this poorly its spirit-consuming ability will fall into the hands of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> onryou and become another weapon in their arsenal. It would doubtlessly be a threat to opposing onshou equal to our power of <<choubuku >>."

"So Hisahide wants to make the 'Hiragumo' a weapon, and the ones targeting Nagi are—"

Takaya frowned in thought. Next to him, Chiaki said, "In any case, we'll be moving blind unless we know something of Hisahide's plans. Maybe we should visit Mt. Shigi again and do another spirit sensing —"

"Chiaki-san," said a voice behind them. Nagi had returned with a towel.

"I've made tea, so please come up. Everyone is welcome..."

"\_\_"

They looked at Nagi, then at each other. Chiaki clapped Takaya's shoulder.

"Well, I go where I'm called... Guess you guys have your work cut out for you, huh? I'll see you later."



"Wh-wh-wh! You're going to go have tea while we're doing all the work...?!"

"I can't refuse an invitation from a girl, right? Hey, I'm just the right guy in the right place, so leave things here to me. Ah, being popular is such hard work..."

"You little punk!"

"You can look forward to some tea pastries. That is, if we leave any. ...All right, let's go have tea, Nagi-chan!"

"Co-come back here! Chiaki, you bastard!"

Chiaki was already walking off with Nagi, a genially hand on her shoulder. Rolling his eyes, Naoe dragged Takaya back by the collar.

"Give it up, Kagetora-sama."

"Dammit! That guy is way too smooth. I'm sick and tired of him making fun of me. Gwaar...!"

Glancing at Takaya fuming in the passenger seat, Naoe murmured, deadpan, "Perhaps you simply leave him too many openings?"

Takaya twitched. "What?"

"More importantly, are your <<powers>> working as they should? Nothing will make you a laughingstock faster than not being

able to call upon them when it comes down to the crunch."

Takaya glared daggers at Naoe. "Maybe you'd like me to demonstrate by squeezing your throat shut right now?"

"I wouldn't mind, but please refrain until after we've passed the curves. Otherwise we might be a nuisance to the oncoming cars."

Takaya slumped into his seat wearily. The car raced along hilly winding roads toward [Mt. Shigi](#) .

"There was another famous general in [Yamato](#) , someone who fought against Hisahide throughout his life and could be called something of a rival to him. His name was [Tsutsui Junkei](#) ..."

"?"

"He was serving Oda at the time of Hisahide's betrayal—he apparently participated in the attack against [Mt. Shigi](#) and won a great victory there. He also seemed to have been confidant to [Akechi Mitsuhide](#) for a time, but when he received a request from Mitsuhide to dispatch troops to [Honnou Temple](#) , he didn't send a single soldier. Incidentally, I believe Mitsuhide also participated in the attack against [Mt. Shigi](#) ."

Takaya rested an arm against the window and looked at Naoe. "So? You think that [Tsutsui Junkei](#) is the one targeting this girl?"

"I have no idea. It would be disastrous if he were resurrected and sided with Oda. But I've never heard of [Tsutsui Junkei](#) becoming an [onryou](#) ..."

"Grah," Takaya groaned, before the corners of his mouth twitched upward. "[Matsunaga Hisahide](#) and [Tsutsui Junkei](#) , huh...? I actually did some research on them on Yuzuru's computer."

"A computer? Very admirable."

"Yeah. But I haven't reached the provinces around the capital yet... I got my hands on Date and Tokugawa, and I finally beat the Houjou the other day..."

"??? Wh-what do you mean?"

"You know, that game. 'Nobunaga's Am'—..."

"I get the picture now. Please stop."

They arrived at Mt. Shigi .

Takaya and Naoe alighted and began the climb to the summit and the shrine of Nagi's hundred pilgrimages. They would be performing a spirit sensing of Mt. Shigi , where Matsunaga Hisahide 's main castle had once stood, but the grounds of Chougosonshi Temple were close enough to obscure all abnormal spiritual energies. So they ascended the temple path beneath the long line of red shrine arches towards 'Kuuhachi-san .' .

"Over there?" Takaya panted when they finally reached the top. 'Kuuhachi-san ,' the shrine to the Dragon God who was said to serve Bishamonten , was well known for its hundred pilgrimages legend. Takaya's feet suddenly stopped dead before they reached the main hall.

"Ugh..." Takaya pressed a hand against his forehead, grimacing.

"Kagetora-sama."

"Gimme a sec. What the heck is this feeling?"

Naoe gazed at the shrine.

"The 'energy' released by the Dragon God. Also the accumulation and condensation of the spiritual energy of people's prayers. Not surprising, when they come from people who would make a hundred pilgrimages. Still, there aren't very many shrines with such strong energies."

"I think I'm gonna pass on going in..."

"Are you all right?"

"!"

Takaya's head suddenly jerked around as if drawn by something behind him.

"Kagetora-sama?"

Takaya's eyes flashed. He spun on his heels and retraced his steps to the narrow path leading into the woods. Naoe immediately followed. The path circled the back of the mountain away from the shrine road, and Takaya sprint down its curving length as if in pursuit of someone.

He came out into a small clearing.

"Kagetora-sama."

Naoe surveyed the area around them. They were already in the vicinity of [Shigisan Castle](#)'s earthwork remains.

Takaya spat in disgust, "Damn, he got away..."

"An [onshou](#) ?"

"Felt like a person. But someone with strong spiritual energy—probably someone possessed by a strong spirit."

Takaya took another look at his surroundings. He felt as if the residual thoughts of those who had lived centuries ago were seething up from the ground all around him.

"This mountain is a pretty scary place, isn't it," Takaya muttered absently. "It looks like sacred ground on the surface, but there's so much hate here still."

The hate of soldiers who had died in the siege of [Shigisan Castle](#) four hundred years ago. The place was filled with [earth-bound spirits](#) , their spiritual energies so vigorous that they were liable to erupt at any moment.

And crucially, the spirit of [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) —

"...!"

Takaya and Naoe whirled to their right in a single simultaneous movement. A strong aura. Someone was there—someone was looking right at them!

(The one I sensed earlier...?!)

The aura felt familiar. This gaze. It was—yes.

(What I felt at Shiohara's house yesterday!)

They concentrated their attention on the source of that stare, wary and poised for battle. Their unseen opponent remained motionless, but his gaze upon them was unmistakably filled with a thirst for blood.

"Come out," Takaya called in a lowered voice. "I know you're behind that tree."

There was no response. Takaya glanced at Naoe. Naoe shook his head—the

sense of hostility had not changed. Takaya began to gather  
<<power>> into his body.

"Come out."

"—"

"If you won't come out, then I'm coming over to you."

Takaya took an experimental step forward, twigs crackling beneath his right foot.

"!"

The earth moaned, and the soil and sand at their feet suddenly erupted. Their opponent's <<nenpa >> gouged the earth with the thunderous crash and roar of a landmine explosion.

"Bastard!"

Takaya released his own <<nenpa >> at the large tree concealing their

attacker as he jumped away.

Countless cracks ran through the tree's trunk before it blasted apart.

The shadow fled, counterattacking as he sprinted for the trees. But his <<nenpa >> smashed into Naoe's <<goshinha >> and disintegrated before it reached Takaya.

"Stop! Stop, damn you—!"

Takaya reached for <<power>> with all his might.

"Didn't I tell you to stop?!"

"!"

Violent plasmatic lights flashed around them. Finding his path blocked, their opponent crouched guardedly, and Takaya and Naoe lost sight of him. In the moment Naoe thought to cast an <<outer bind >>, their foe turned, eyes glinting.

"Waugh!"

Wind piercing as a blade-edge tore into Naoe, and he doubled over.

"Naoe!"

Takaya moved to stand protectively over him. Something let out a terrible screech in front of them, and Takaya spun in surprise to see a tree fall towards them as its roots cracked sharply apart.

"Shit!"

Takaya immediately grabbed Naoe and rolled both of them back. The gigantic tree hit the ground with a resounding crash, missing them by inches.

Takaya yelled, "Who the hell are you, you bastard? Are you [Tsutsui Junkei](#) ?!"

Another tree collapsed on their right. Takaya reflexively jumped back, shouting, "Are you the one who attacked Shiohara Nagi...?!"



"Kagetora-sama!"

Trees fell toward them from all directions. They had no choice but to retreat back along the path, barely managing to avoid being crushed. Takaya yelled toward the space now blocked by fallen trees, "You bastard! I'm not letting you get away!"



But both the shadow and its aura had already disappeared. They had belonged to a young man of middling height. That he had attacked them meant, nine chances out of ten, that he was an [onshou](#) of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>.

"Dammit—...!" Takaya groaned, biting his lip, and turned to see Naoe leaning against a tree behind him. Blood seeped faintly through the horizontal tear running across his shirt.

"You okay? That wound."

"A scratch. But this is getting ugly."

Naoe glared fiercely in the direction their foe had gone, his face set in a stern mask.

"You got something, Naoe?"

"Yes..." Naoe's face darkened even further. "Though I don't yet know his identity. Did you not notice, Kagetora-sama? That man just now, he was not just a spirit in possession of a body."

"What...?"

Takaya blinked. Naoe's eyes were razor-sharp as they gazed back at him.

"He was [kanshousha](#) ."

"!"

Takaya's eyes widened in shock. Naoe nodded soberly and turned to look once more in the direction the man had disappeared. Takaya did the

same, expression tense.

Oda's [onshou](#) were moving.

Their aim: to destroy the resurrected [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) .

"What is the meaning of this, Nagi?!" Fujiko, Nagi's great-aunt, demanded, her face changing color as soon as she saw Chiaki. "What are you thinking, bringing a man like him into the house? He's one of those reporter people, isn't he? Throw him out right now! I don't know what he's looking for, but he won't find it here!"

"No! Great-aunt!"

"I'm telling you this for your own good. How could you bring a strange man into the house so soon after your father's death? What sort of shameless behavior is this, Nagi? Will you blemish the name of our house and company even more than you've already done? Drive him out right this instant!"

(Oh man—...)

An embarrassed Chiaki was seated on the living room couch, sipping red tea. He could hear the argument between Nagi and her great-aunt through the single door that separated them whether or not he wanted to. And he

had heard enough to understand quite clearly how badly they got along.

(I really kinda feel sorry for her...)

Just as he finished his tea and stood, intending to leave quietly, the door opened and Nagi appeared.

"Nagi...?"

"My great-aunt is going home," Nagi said, wiping slightly at her eyes. "I asked her to go."

"But, I..."

"It's okay. I think she wanted to go, too. I'll be fine on my own."

The stairs thumped loudly. They could hear Nagi's great-aunt cursing hysterically before a door slammed shut. Her great-aunt and great-uncle appeared to have left the house.

The hum of a car engine gradually faded into the distance until only the singing of cicadas remained.

Quiet settled around the house.

"But this will be hard for you, too."

"Not at all..." Nagi gave him a small smile. "It's quieter by myself.

I'm glad she left," Nagi reassured him, then noticed that Chiaki's cup was empty. "Would you like more tea?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, thank you."

Gazing silently at Nagi as she courteously poured tea from the pot into his cup, Chiaki suddenly asked, "Um, Nagi-san...?"

Nagi lifted her head. "Yes?"

Chiaki was forced to swallow his words at the terribly innocent expression on her face.

Could this girl really have asked the Dragon God to curse her stepfather to death...?

He couldn't ask her that question, not with her pure, guileless face right in front of him.

Nagi asked Chiaki doubtfully after several seconds of silence, "What is it?"

"Ah, nothing—" Giving up on those thoughts, Chiaki sighed and leaned toward Nagi again. "You prayed to the Dragon God of [Mt. Shigi](#) for a wish to be granted, right? What was it you prayed for?"

Nagi's hand on the teapot stilled, and she looked blankly at Chiaki. "Oh but, aren't you supposed to know?"

"Huh? Er...yeah..."

Since Nagi believed Chiaki to be a servant of the Dragon God, she also assumed that he would know what she had wished for. Chiaki scratched his cheek, stumped.

The doorbell rang.

Nagi looked puzzled at the unexpected arrival of a guest, but answered "Coming—" and went out to the front door.

"Yamamoto-san!"

He could hear Nagi's voice from the open door. Chiaki peered out curiously from the door next to the corridor.

Nagi was conversing with a tall man in his thirties, apparently an acquaintance.

Yamamoto noticed Chiaki.

"This is my friend, Chiaki-san," Nagi immediately explained.

Meeting his gaze, Chiaki gave him a polite greeting, which the friendly-seeming man called Yamamoto returned with an urbane smile.

After a long exchange with Nagi, Yamamoto courteously said his good-byes to both of them and left. Looking after Yamamoto as he disappeared into the night, Chiaki asked Nagi, "Who was that?"

Nagi stepped back inside, looking at him with something like relief.

"Yamamoto-san from the company. He's my stepfather's secretary, but he's been taking care of me, so I don't mind him..."

He appeared to have been worried about Nagi and come to make sure she was all right.

"Hmm..." Chiaki murmured approvingly. "Well, shall we have more tea, then?"

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## Chapter 6: Fireflies of Flame

Chiaki

remained behind to guard Nagi that night. Takaya and Naoe arrived back at the hotel around eight p.m., and Takaya immediately went into his room, saying that he would order something from room service for dinner. Thinking that he must be tired, Naoe did not try to keep him, and followed suit.

Sometime past midnight, just as he was about to change and turn in for the night, Naoe heard a knock on his door. He went to open it, and standing there in his doorway was...

Naoe's eyes widened.

"Kagetora-sama..."

...Takaya, who should have gone to bed hours ago.

"Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No—"

Takaya, looking awkward, searched Naoe's face for a moment before casting his gaze down at his feet and murmuring diffidently, "Can...I come in for a bit?"

Looking around the room, Takaya spotted the half-empty pack of cigarettes on the table.

"You smoke?"

"Ah, yes..."

"I see. You looked the type... And I guess you do."

Naoe had never smoked in front of Takaya. Takaya took a seat on the bed, feet outstretched, and raised the can of beer he had brought with him to his mouth. Naoe took it out of his hand.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

"Please stop drinking. What would you do if it blunted your <<power>> on this mission?"

"Why don't you speak for yourself, then? Smoking doesn't weaken your <<power>>?"

In lieu of a reply, Naoe opened the fridge.

"How about some orange juice?"

"No thanks."

Naoe turned with a slight, wry smile.

"What's wrong?"

"I was planning to go to bed as soon as I got back to my room, but for some reason I couldn't sleep. I thought that beer might help, but it's

only cleared my head..." Takaya replied, brushing back his hair.

Naoe poured cold water into a cup from the pitcher on the table and handed it to Takaya.

Takaya leaned back against the wall and sighed. "You know, when I think about that girl, Nagi, I can't sleep. She's probably around my sister Miya's age."

"..."

"My family is all screwed up too, so I can understand her feelings a bit. But at least I have Miya, so I've never felt lonely. She—"

Takaya stopped, and his eyes fell.

"She...has no one."

"..."

Naoe gazed at Takaya.

"You are truly a kind person."

"Th-that's not—I mean, I'm just—"

"It is this understanding of other people's pain that sometimes worries me."

Takaya turned his head.

"You worry... about me...?"

"Your kindness inclines you towards self-sacrifice. You will leap into



battle for those who are irreplaceable to you, though you know that those battles will leave you scarred. Watching you forcing yourself to smile to hide your pain from others is—"

Naoe looked down.

"Is unbearable for me."

"Naoe..."

Takaya stared at him, wide-eyed. Naoe smiled gently.

"I will protect you. And in order to protect you, I will also protect those you hold dear, because you regard their wellbeing as being equivalent to your own. Yet—"

"..."

"Please do not forget this one thing, Kagetora-sama. There is no one more important to me than you. I will do whatever it takes to protect you—and if ultimately no other methods remain to me, I will not hesitate to use whomever I can and discard whomever I must. No matter how irreplaceable they may be to you... No matter what scars it may leave on your heart." Naoe stopped, pain in his face. "No matter how you might hate me for it—"

"..."

Naoe's grim, anguished tone startled Takaya. But a moment later he smiled at Naoe with terrifying calm.

"Are you ...really capable of that?"

"...!"

Naoe's head jerked up as if he had been stabbed. Takaya set down his cup, eyes downcast.

"I want you to tell me about Yuzuru."

"What?"

"What was that power he used in [Sendai](#) ? What does 'menace to the [Roku Dou Kai](#) ' mean? I just—I want to know, because I have no clue about any of it. So will you please tell me?"

"You heard from Nagahide, then?"

Takaya nodded, and Naoe winced inwardly in consternation. He'd meant to warn Chiaki not to tell Takaya yet, but—

"... I see," Naoe sighed. There was no point in keeping it from Takaya any longer if he already knew—and perhaps it was time that he did in any case.

"I can only tell you what we know, which I'm afraid is actually quite limited. Buddhist teachings say that all living things are reborn into one of six realms according to the deeds they performed in their past life: [Hell](#) , the [Realm of Hungry Ghosts](#) , the [Realm of Beasts](#) , the [Realm of Conflict](#) , the [Realm of Men](#) , and [Heaven](#) . This is the '[Roku Dou Kai](#) '. Until we attain Enlightenment and reach nirvana, we will be forever caught within these Six Paths. So the [Roku Dou Kai](#) is the eternal cycle of death and rebirth of Buddhist ideology, but a menace to the Six Paths...? What could that mean...?"

"So you don't know either?"

"No, I don't know what Kousaka is trying to say with regard to the 'Roku Dou Kai '. But judging from his summoning of Daiitoku-Myouou and Gouzanze-Myouou in Sendai and the calming of Kasuke and the other spirits, I would say that Yuzuru-san carries some sort of divine power."

"Divine power?"

"The power of the Buddhas and gods. Our <<choubukuryouku >> is one manifestation therein. The Power of the Divine appears in three forms: the Power of Incantation and Prayer, which is the power of the Buddhas, the Power of Piety and Virtue, which is the devotee's own power, and the power of 'place', which is the Power of the Universe. But Yuzuru-san's power is none of these.

"...Which means..."



"The power Yuzuru-san used was a form of divine power, but he did not require an intermediary—for example, our meditation upon seed words or the chanting of mantras or devotions to a particular Buddha—to call upon it. He was able to unleash the enormous power of the Buddhas in a completely natural fashion. Can you not guess what this implies?"

"Eh?"

Naoe's eyes, narrowed and piercing, were fixed on Takaya's face.

"His Power of Virtue *is* the Power of Prayer. And the explanation for that...'

"..."

"...can only be that he himself is a Buddha."

Takaya inhaled sharply, staring at Naoe in wide-eyed astonishment.

"You're saying that Yuzuru isn't human?"

"No, I'm not. But neither, perhaps, is he an ordinary unenlightened person such as we are."

"..."

Takaya's face stiffened. He managed to rearrange his expression into a smile by sheer force of will.

"That can't be true."

"..."

"Yuzuru isn't—that special. He's just an ordinary senior high student. He goes to school and talks about the Giants losing and Hiroshima winning, and about books and games and Club and tests."

"..."

"He's no different from us. There's nothing strange about him. Maybe he's got a bit of spiritual power, but there's nothing special about him at all!"

"... Takaya-san."

"Yuzuru's just an ordinary person. He's no different from anybody else. I'm only friends with him because we get along. Because we have fun together. There's no reason other than that!"

Naoe's eyes widened in surprise. Takaya insisted, almost as if he were trying to convince himself, "None of it was planned. All this weird crap about Kagetora calculating everything from the beginning—I never became friends with him because of that. I'm friends with Yuzuru because...!"

"Then Takaya-san," Naoe interrupted gently, "don't you already have your answer?"

Takaya looked up.

"*You* were the one who formed this friendship with Yuzuru-san, correct? It was something you and Yuzuru-san created

together. That's why nothing could ever take its place. You could never answer Yuzuru-san's sincerity with contempt. You should continue to treasure this friendship and your feelings just as you have."

"... Naoe."

"Please stop immediately turning the blame on yourself like this. To throw away your own seventeen years is... Did you think that no one would ache for you when you torment yourself like this? You do not only belong to yourself...so please do not forget your own worth. And if you do forget—" Naoe closed his eyes and said, his heart in his words, "I will always be here to remind you."

"—"

Takaya stared at him. Naoe smiled slightly. "Even if all others should abandon you, I will remain by your side. Always..."

Lips pressed together, Takaya looked away. His hands locked around each other. He murmured haltingly, "I've been having these odd dreams lately..."

Naoe's shoulders shivered.

"They were so strange...so real... About things that happened a really long time ago... I had no idea what they were at first, but... They were probably—..."

Naoe was still as a statue. Takaya fell silent, a pensive look on his face.

"... You don't want me to get my memories back, do you...?"

Naoe stopped breathing.

Takaya continued, "Because you don't want me to remember what happened between us thirty years ago...?"

Naoe stared at Takaya wordlessly. Takaya murmured, his eyes clouded with uncertainty, "Can't we go on...just as we are?"

"Kagetora-sama."

"Why do I have to remember the past? If it was so painful, wouldn't I be better off without it?!"

"..."

"So tell me that we can stay like this, Naoe! Tell me that we don't need to change anything. Tell me not to remember anything!"

For a moment Naoe could not draw breath. Then he deliberately concealed his own shaking at Takaya's entreaty behind an expressionless mask.

"Are you afraid of regaining your memories?"

"... No, that's not it." Takaya bit his lip. "Yes I am, I am afraid of that too... Because I don't know what I'll become afterwards. But that's not it... That's not what I'm afraid of...it's more that—"

Takaya said, and stopped. He looked straight at Naoe.

He was afraid of losing him.

And these bonds they were starting to build between them—

Which he might well destroy with his own two hands.

He could not say that remembering what had happened between them would not change him.

"..."

The words Naoe dropped into the silence were heart-achingly frail.

"If I tell you not to remember, would you consent to forget the things I did, then, just like that...?"

Takaya stared at him, frozen.

Naoe averted his eyes from Takaya's imploring gaze. He bit his lip lightly before donning his expressionless mask once more to state with perfect coolness, "That would be exceedingly naïve of you, Kagetora-sama. Please think carefully upon what a burden you are to us without your memories."

"Naoe...!"

"I believe I would like something to drink as well. I'll fetch some ice," Naoe commented, standing and picking up the ice pail on the table. He left the room with Takaya's reproachful gaze on his back.

Naoe stood waiting in front of the ice-vending machine, lost in thought.

*"Can't we go on just as we are?"*



Takaya's words ached in his chest.

Naoe wanted nothing more than for Takaya to never recall the abominable past. Even it meant that the memories of the four hundred years they had spent together would be lost forever— He could bear even that wrenching sadness. For Naoe, having Kagetora at his side now was more important than anything else.

He would trade those four hundred years for the precious *now*. He didn't want to see it crumble around them.

(I, more than anyone...)—Naoe told Takaya silently—(...want us to remain the way we are...)

Naoe closed his eyes tightly.

He prayed for the strength to surmount the past.

And that, when the time came, no matter what shape it took—

It would not mean their 'end'.

If he could believe in the future that lay beyond...

Returning with the ice, Naoe opened the door to an oddly quiet room.

Wondering if Takaya had returned to his own room, Naoe called,  
"Kagetora-sama...?"

When he stepped inside, Naoe discovered that Takaya was still within.

He had fallen asleep on the bed waiting for Naoe to return, his breathing already slowed into the calm, steady rhythm of deep sleep.

He must have been exhausted; he didn't stir at Naoe's voice, and waking him appeared a somewhat difficult proposition. No help for it, Naoe thought, pulling the blanket over him—he'd take Takaya's room. He picked up the key and adjusted the air conditioning. On the verge of stepping out—

"..."

Takaya suddenly turned toward him in his sleep, almost as if he wanted to pull Naoe back.

Naoe stopped. He moved back to Takaya's bedside and readjusted the blanket over him.

Takaya's face seemed somehow more innocent in sleep. Though his nights had been disturbed by dreams of late, his face was peaceful and without torment now as Naoe looked down upon it.

Naoe's gaze was suddenly drawn to a small scar on Takaya's right temple, a remnant of the wound he had received in the battle with [Takeda Shingen](#) after their reunion.

It was almost undetectable now.

"..."

Naoe stretched out a hand and gently touched the scar. That hand stroked

Takaya's hair, once.

He reached for the switch next to the bed and turned off the light, leaving Takaya's face dimly illuminated by the meager bedside nightlight. The bed creaked softly as Naoe sat beside him.

"..."

His shadow fell across Takaya's face.

Naoe cupped Takaya's cheek with his right hand, so gently that he might have been holding something fragile enough to shatter at a touch.

Takaya turned his face away. Slightly startled, Naoe withdrew his hand.

He stared fixedly at Takaya, fighting to endure the emotions that suddenly welled up within him.

Then he reached out once more and fearfully cupped Takaya's cheeks with both hands.

"...Please...forgive me..." he whispered, the words shaking with the force of his feelings. "...Don't...cast me away—..."

A horn blared in the distance, in this ancient sleeping city throwing out its call to distant memories.

This moment's happiness was all that he asked. He knew that the morning would come, but at least until the dawn—

I want to be in your heart.

You, my only...

Life—...

Silence had settled around the tracks after the passage of the last train, but choruses of frogs serenaded the night from the nearby rice paddies. This deep into the night, the neighborhood lay in quiet slumber, and the only activity came from the occasional car passing through.

Chiaki had stayed to guard Nagi.

In the end he just couldn't bring himself to leave her in the house by herself. He would have felt uneasy leaving her all alone in the large empty house now that her great-aunt and great-uncle had left, even without the added concern of the 'Hiragumo ', a monster of unknown nature, living inside her. The possibility that the one who had attacked her during the day would attempt another assault at night was a large one.

Chiaki had also grown rather fond of Nagi, so he and the Leopard were staying for the night.

*"Then I'll lend you a room,"* Nagi had said anxiously, but—

*"If you do anything weird to her, even by accident, I'll kick your ass!"*

Takaya had certainly driven in the stake, so he'd ended up playing

bodyguard from the car. 'Do anything weird' was a bit insulting, but the last thing Nagi needed was for people to misunderstand and start spreading strange rumors about her in her neighborhood.

(I'm such a gentleman...) Chiaki sighed deeply.

Takaya and Naoe had told him about the attack at Mt. Shigi upon their return. The three of them then tried to extract the 'Hiragumo' but—

"It's not working," Naoe murmured hopelessly after performing hypnotism on Nagi. "We're too late. The 'Hiragumo' has sunk its roots too deeply into Nagi-san's body. We can no longer extract it."

"We can't? Then what do we do...?!"

"If we try to pull it out by force, we will only injure Nagi-san's body, resulting in her death. We're too late. If we had noticed a just week earlier, we could have..."

Stunned, Takaya shouted at Chiaki, "Then there's nothing we can do?!"

"..."

Chiaki felt the same anguish. The 'Hiragumo' had already become half the owner of Nagi's body.

"The 'Hiragumo' has made Nagi-san's body its nest. It acts like a parasite; as long as it has a host, the 'Hiragumo' can use its powers. In other words so long as Nagi-san's body lives, the 'Hiragumo' will continue to grow in power...!"

"!"

Chiaki and Takaya swallowed their words and looked down at the hypnotized Nagi.

As long as she lived...

(What a quandary.)

Chiaki leaned back against the seat, gazing at Nagi's darkened room. Hisahide's usage of the 'Hiragumo' as his secret weapon had dragged Nagi into the <<Yami-Sengoku >>. As long as the 'Hiragumo' continued to live within her, Nagi would be a target for the other onshou .

(And yet there is no way to extract it...)

Just as that thought passed through his head—Chiaki's eyes, staring blindly at the window, widened abruptly.

He couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

Hazy lights floated at the perimeter of the house. They circled, fluttering, and multiplied. Where were they coming from? No—

(They're fireballs...!)

Chiaki climbed out of the car and dashed towards the house. The fireballs had already encircled the house in the darkness. They looked almost like a glowing swarm of enormous fireflies.

A strange sound reached his ears, and he strained to hear.

Hoooi, hoooi—...

An auditory hallucination? No, he *had* heard it.

Hoooi, hoooi—...

Hoooi, hoooi—...

A person's voice? A thin, woman's voice.

(Nagi...?!)

Chiaki stared.

(Agh...!)

The fireballs were drawn through Nagi's window. One after another, they disappeared into the house so fast that something must have been pulling them inside. The queue was endless. His skin crawling, Chiaki turned around and involuntarily cried out.

Fireballs without number streamed through the sky towards the house from the east. They formed a glowing line from the distant darkness straight into Nagi's window.

(So that's the 'hoihoi fire'...?!)

Chiaki looked up at the window in astonishment and sucked in another startled breath.

An enormous tea kettle monster filled the window. Hair-covered limbs sprung out of the kettle's body, and it bore a human, hate-filled face. Its yawning maw gulped down the fireballs like mouthfuls of water.

(Eh...?!)

The image of the monster quivered, and Nagi reappeared in her own shape. She stood next to the window, mouth open, drinking in the firefalls. She appeared to be unconscious.

Nagi was fusing with the 'Hiragumo'...!

Hoooi, hoooi—...

Hoooi, hoooi—...

"Dammit! Wake up! Nagi!"

The hoihoi fire continued to fly through the window.

To be sucked right into Nagi's mouth.

"Stop it! Nagi!"

Chiaki's desperate cry couldn't reach her. And then—!

"...!"

Some enormous energy crashed into the house. Glass shattered, and Nagi crouched, screaming.

"Nagi!"

The line of fireballs abruptly broke apart. Someone aimed a <<nenpa >> at Chiaki's feet as he sprinted towards the house. The air exploded, and the ground caved inward. Leaping back reflexively, Chiaki put himself on guard.



"Who's there?!"

In response to his challenge—

A figure appeared below the light of a streetlamp.

Chiaki's eyes narrowed as he examined his opponent warily.

It was a young man of average height and build with sun-tanned skin, an angular face, short-cropped hair, and slanting eyes—a mountain cat in human shape.

A humorless smile lifted the corners of Chiaki's mouth.

"So you were the **kanshousha** who attacked us earlier today."

"Uesugi's **Yasha-shuu** . I have heard of you, but this is the first time I've had the chance to face you."

"...!"

"So you're the ones who would confront our lord. I see; as Mori-dono averred, you look exceedingly obstinate."

Chiaki's smile disappeared. He demanded in a low, grim voice, "Are you one of Oda's **onshou** ?"

"..."

"How 'bout you tell me your name?"

The man calmly asked, ignoring the question, "Do you intend to protect that monster, Uesugi?"



"I don't remember volunteering to do any such thing," Chiaki snorted.

"I'm protecting a girl who's been possessed. Sorry Bro, but you're not laying a finger on her while I'm around."

"That girl can no longer be saved."

Chiaki's brows creased. "What?"

"She will not be released from the 'Hiragumo' until her body dies. As long as the body, the 'Hiragumo's' host, is not abandoned, it cannot be separated from the parasite.

Protecting her is meaningless. I cannot let you have such a dangerous monster."

"... What do you mean by that?"

"The 'Hiragumo '

only grows in power when it is a parasite in a host body. While in its 'nest', it devours spiritual and otherworldly energies. When it loses its body, it becomes a purely 'spiritual' mass and reverts back into a harmless low-class phantom."

Chiaki affixed a cocky grin on his face with effort.

"Huuuh. You sure did your homework on this thing."

"Matsunaga Hisahide plans to use the 'Hiragumo ' to steal every last drop of spiritual energy from the <<Yami-Sengoku >> warriors. I cannot overlook this. In order to halt the 'Hiragumo 's growth, I have no choice but to kill its 'nest,'" the man said, not

twitching an eyebrow. "Do not interfere with me. Move out of my way, Uesugi."

"And if I said 'no'?"

"Then I will make you. I am, as you said, kanshousha . Your <<choubuku >: trick will have no effect on me."

"We'll see about that," Chiaki retorted, pulling a dagger-like object into his right hand and pushing it out of its scabbard with a finger.

"The spirit can still be exorcised when its host body dies."

"So you would interfere no matter what?"

"If you're planning to kill Nagi."

The man gazed quietly at the slender blade glinting in Chiaki's hand,

but made no move. That calm could only mean that his was a name renowned even among the [kanshousha](#) , Chiaki thought. This was not an [onshou](#) he had fought before. One of Oda's generals who was also [kanshousha](#) —who?

"Will you tell me your name?"

A self-assured smile filled the man's tanned face at Chiaki's question.

"Vassal of the Oda Clan, [Sassa Narimasa](#) . If a bout is what you desire, then I shall take up the challenge."

"!"

For a moment Chiaki was lost for words.

([Sassa Narimasa](#) ...?!)

[Sassa Narimasa](#) , an Oda general famous for his loyalty and valor, had been first on the list of Nobunaga's [Kurohoro-gumi](#) , a group of elite bodyguards. He had been one of Nobunaga's most

faithful and trusted retainers, and historically fought in many fierce battles. He had continued to resist [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) even after Nobunaga's death.

He had fought in Nobunaga's advance guard during the subjugation of Northern [Ecchuu](#) and [Echigo](#) , and was later given [Ecchuu](#) . He had crossed swords with Uesugi forces many times.

(So he's [Sassa Narimasa](#) —)

Chiaki's mouth tightened as he concentrated power in his belly. A heat shimmer flared around Narimasa's entire body, and he smiled faintly.

"You must be destroyed before Lord Nobunaga's resurrection in any case, so I have no objections. Show me what you've got, Uesugi!"

Chiaki, also pooling his <<power>>, stood his ground and yelled, "You'd better not regret this, Bro!"

But then—

Something flared behind Chiaki as if in an interjection to their exchange, and he turned, startled.

"Wh...!"

They both swallowed back shouts. Nagi's room glowed orange. Her figure appeared at the window, surrounded by orange fire.

"Nagi!"

Her wide-open eyes were blank and unseeing. As if moving to invisible puppet strings, she climbed over the window sill and stepped into the air.

"!"

*Watch out!* Chiaki thought, jerking forward, but Nagi didn't fall. She floated in midair like a heavenly maiden garbed in her robe of feathers.

(What the...)

Chiaki stopped, stunned. Nagi reached out into the air, cupped a

fireball flying towards her, brought it to her mouth, and gulped it down.

(That's the 'Hiragumo '...!)

"You!"

"! ...Don't!"

Chiaki had no time to react to the <<nenpa >> Narimasa shot at Nagi. But the <<nenpa >> was absorbed harmlessly into her body.

(<<Power>> has no effect on her!)

The phantom within her fed on spiritual and otherworldly energy. It was also capable of absorbing their <<nenpa >>, rendering direct attacks useless.

"It's a monster!"

Nagi continued feeding on the fireballs that came flying towards her, and the orange glow around her brightened. At times her shape wavered mirage-like between her own and that of the 'Hiragumo ' as she steadily floated higher into the sky.

(It's getting away...!)

Chiaki dove into his car. Narimasa issued orders to the <<nue >> beside him as he likewise made preparations to give chase. Looking as if she were swimming through the air, Nagi drifted westward.

(You're not getting away!)

Chiaki lowered the hand break and stepped hard on the gas. The car

burst forward. The hoihoi fire streamed out in a long line behind Nagi.

Behind them was Narimasa's nue .

The orange lights flew like giant fireflies towards the Nara basin.

Teeth clenched, staring fixedly into the sky, Chiaki kept the pedal to the floor.

(Nagi...!)

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## Chapter 7: Vengeful Dragon

Night swallowed the girl.

She knew exactly where she was even in the bottomless darkness.  
Beneath

her feet were the familiar steps of the shrine-path to the summit of Mt. Shigi .

Dilapidated red-painted arches stretched endlessly into the darkness before her. Her destination remained ahead of her no matter how far she walked. Her tired feet grew heavier and heavier, but countless arches waited to be traversed.

*"Are we there yet? How much further?"* she could remember asking someone again and again while walking this same path.

*"Almost there. We're almost there,"* a voice coaxed. *"You can do it. Just a little further."*

Her beloved mother's voice, encouraging her and calming her tantrums on the steep, endless road to 'Kuuhachi-san' when she cried, "I wanna go home! Let's go home!"

*"The dragon god is up there,"* her mother told her, taking her hand as they continued towards the summit. *"We're*

*going to make a wish together. We're going to wish that Nagi will grow big, that you'll be okay even if you're alone. We'll pray for the Dragon God to protect you, okay?"*



Her mother's voice receded into the distance, and Nagi found herself standing alone in front of the Dragon God's temple at the summit.

*"You'll be okay even if you're alone, won't you?"*

Her mother's last words echoed back to her, the last words her mother had said that morning as she saw Nagi off to school.

By the time she returned, her mother had already stopped breathing. She had fallen across the living room table, a medicine bottle and white pills scattered around her, the motionless body still slightly warm.

Her mother had committed suicide during a fit of neurosis, and no one shed a tear for her at her funeral. Her relatives looked on, as expressionless and cold as ever, as her stepfather buried her with less interest and emotion than he might have given to paperwork at the office.

He had, after all, just rid himself of some troublesome baggage.

Nothing else matter if he could have the company. On the contrary, the death of his wife had probably come as a relief to him.

He had driven her mother to this. He had only used her as a stepping-stone to his ambition.

The rest of the family had viewed her mother's elopement as a betrayal and blemish on the Shiohara name and treated her with contempt. Forced to stand helplessly by while an outsider had uprooted the company from their grasp like a sudden hurricane, they had heaped all their unfulfilled hopes and expectations on her mother.

Crushed beneath the weight of a mountain of censure and blame, her mother had spiraled into depression and mental illness. She was moved in and out of hospitals, but even at the end could only yearn hopelessly for the past. *"I want to go back. I want return to the time when the three of us were together, he and you and I,"* she had repeated over and over again, her eyes far away.

So her heart and mind walked the paths of memory to those days that would never come again, to the only place where she could find peace.

*"In the house where I could see ocean..."*

Nagi remained dry-eyed at her mother's funeral, feeling only rage within her heart. She hated the ones who had hounded her mother. She hated those faces full of calculation, those slimy smiles. They had killed her mother. Her mother had been murdered...!

They all deserved to fall to Hell.

She heard, in that moment, a low voice booming out of the darkness.

<<Dost thou wish to lead them to Hell?>>

Nagi's shoulders quivered, and she looked up.

Something began to glitter and dance like gold dust in the depths of the deep night, the particles multiplying until they looked like a gold wave rolling towards her.

<<Dost thou hate...?>>

It was a man's deep voice. The gold dust coalesced and swelled before her eyes.

<<Dost thou wish to kill—...?>>

!

Nagi backed away in terror. The gold dust began to transform. A moment later, a gigantic golden dragon hovered in the air before her.

<<Thy hate summoned me. Awakened me.>>

Nagi couldn't speak. She wanted to run away, but her feet refused to move. The golden dragon's enormous body undulated in place, its ferocious eyes fixed on her.

<<I shall grant thy wish. I will lead all who are subject to thy hate to Hell. Fear thee not, nor evermore. I will protect thee.>>

<<Thy hate is my power. It hath awakened my vengeful soul. Let us become one and fulfill our vengeance. Whomsoever thou dost hate shall fall into Hell. Thou shalt become my power.>>

The dragon pressed against Nagi. She cowered, her arms wrapped around her head. The dragon roared thunderously, <<We shall not be defeated! We will take Nobunaga's head!>>

Nagi covered her ears.

She felt as if something were forcing itself into her, that her heart

might shatter under the pressure. She cried out, begging for someone to save her. But whose name could she call? Neither her mother nor her father could answer her any longer. Who else did she have?!

*"Help me."*

<<I shall protect thee.>>

*"You'll help me...?"*

<<I will kill. Whosoever thou dost hate.>>

Nagi screamed. She didn't want to be alone. She wanted someone to be there for her, someone to care for her.

*"Oh please, help me!"*

The phone rang at around four in the morning, awakening Naoe. Chiaki was the only one who would be calling at this hour, so something must have happened. He picked up the receiver and answered, his voice strained, "Hello—..."

The ringing had also awakened Takaya. He heard Naoe's voice through a fog of sleep and sat up abruptly. Naoe was talking into the receiver. Takaya glanced at the time: 4:15. Why was he here? he wondered, blearily combing back his hair.

"All right. We'll head over now," Naoe said, and hung up.

"Chiaki...?"

"Yes. Were you awake?"

"No, the phone woke me. What's up with Chiaki?"

Naoe hurriedly began to change.

"Nagi-san is missing. The 'Hiragumo' appears to have taken control. Oda's onshou is after her as well. As we thought, the one who attacked us yesterday belonged to the Oda."

"Oda...? Ranmaru and his lot?"

"No—" Naoe answered in a tight voice as he thrust his arms into the sleeves of his shirt. "Our opponent this time is a general called Sassa Narimasa ."

"Sassa...Narimasa...?"

"Formerly a warlord of Ecchuu , said to be one of Nobunaga's most loyal vassals. This is the first I've heard of him entering the <<Yami-Sengoku >> as one of Nobunaga's commanders, but judging by the fact that he has the <<power>> to perform kanshou , we must not let our guard down against him. We need to set out

immediately. Kagetora-sama, please get ready. Has the alcohol dispersed

from your body?"

Takaya climbed out of bed.

"Get ready? ...We're going to join Chiaki?"

"Yes. He's at [Yamato-Koizumi Station](#) now. We must find Nagi-san before she either reaches [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) or is attacked by Narimasa."

Naoe was already moving towards the door with car and room keys in hand.

"Kagetora-sama. Please wait for me at the entrance. I will bring the car around. Hurry as much as you can."

"Got it," Takaya responded, moving quickly now, wide-awake.

The approaching dawn had already dyed the clouds stretching across the sky a faint purple by the time they rendezvoused with Chiaki in front of the [JR Yamato-Koizumi Station](#) .

Chiaki raised a hand at Takaya and Naoe in greeting as they climbed out of the car. He came towards them, a sour expression on his face.

"Sorry. I lost sight of Nagi. I chased her all the way here, but..."

"You said she was flying—really?"

Chiaki nodded at Takaya's question. "That's the '[Hiragumo](#) '. It gets its power from feeding off the hoihoi fire, which it was calling. That monster awakened the [kaki](#) of [Mt. Ryuuou](#) because it wanted dinner. Goddammit!" He punched his palm with his fist.

"What about Oda's people? Have they found Nagi-san?"

"I don't know. That asshole Narimasa is planning to kill both Nagi and the

'Hiragumo '. Both the parasite and its host. If we don't do something quick..."

"Not so good," Naoe said, raising a hand to his chin. If they only knew where Nagi was headed...

After a long moment spent in deliberation, Takaya said decisively, "...Guess I'll have to give it a try."

Naoe and Chiaki both turned to Takaya.

"Give...what a try?"

Takaya stretched exaggeratedly, then straightened.

"Search for the 'Hiragumo '.

You're pissing me off with all this bullshit about how I'm a burden and have responsibilities and crap, and I'm sick and tired of hearing it already. Not that I think this'll work, but I'll try sending a 'Gohou Douji of the Sword'."

"A Gohou Douji ...?"

Naoe inadvertently stared at Takaya.

"Kagetora-sama. Have you regained that much of your memories?"

"I remembered when we were talking about Mt. Shigi . 'Cause it shows up on that thing, the 'Scroll of an Engi-Era Faith-Healing' from the Legends of Shigisan Picture Scroll , right?"

Chiaki looked at him oddly. "You know the Legends of Shigisan Picture Scroll pretty well, huh? Why is that...?"

"Why...?"

He swallowed his reply before it left his mouth. True, he remembered studying the scroll in Classical Literature, but he certainly couldn't have learned about the ritual for summoning a 'Gohou Douji of the Sword' in class. That knowledge could only have belonged to Kagetora.

"..."

Now Takaya looked bewildered. He was, without question, steadily retrieving Kagetora's knowledge. Naoe's eyebrows also drew together slightly as he gazed at Takaya...

But he said, fighting back his private emotions, "Kagetora-sama. Please give it a try. It would be the fastest method for finding the 'Hiragumo'."

Naoe's words called Takaya back to himself. They looked again at each other and pulled themselves back to the task at hand.

"...Okay."

According to legend, the 'Gohou Douji of the Sword,' a servant of Bishamonten, had appeared on the pillow of Emperor Daigo in the Heian Era in answer to the prayers of Mt. Shigi monk Myouren for the emperor's recovery from illness. This was the scene depicted on the Scroll. Takaya wanted to use this 'Gohou Douji of the Sword' to look for Nagi.

"Chiaki, you're carrying a knife, right? Lemme borrow it for a bit."

"This?" Chiaki asked, handing over the 20-centimeter <sup>[1]</sup> dagger he had used earlier. This was the weapon Chiaki carried with him



for self-defense, a knife from an unknown maker, in actuality a votive sword which had once belonged to some small shrine.

Naoe prepared paper and pen and presented them to Takaya. Takaya closed his eyes and began to chant as he unhesitatingly wrote

Bishamonten 's

mantra upon the paper in Sanskrit. He then wrapped a portion of the blade with the paper and held it up reverently in both hands. He gathered his power, still chanting Bishamonten 's mantra, as he sank into trance.

"On beishiramandaya sowaka , on beishiramandaya sowaka —..."

He drew Bishamonten 's seed syllable in the air above the dagger as he chanted.

"On beishiramandaya sowaka ."

Then he placed the fore-and middle fingers of his right hand against his forehead.

"Let the Dharma of the Sword open mine eyes."

He touched the sword to his fingers, and the Sanskrit-inscribed paper wrapped around the blade ignited. A figure appeared within the fire: the gold-skinned bearer of a thousand blades, 'Gohou Douji of the Sword'.

The Gohou Douji summoned a cloud and rode it into the sky, all in space of a few heartbeats.

Following it with their eyes, Naoe and Chiaki sighed as they had many

times before at this casual display of Kagetora's power.

"He's not your ordinary kid off the block, that's for sure..."

"Kagetora-sama. The Gohou Douji is heading towards the south-east—"

Takaya finally opened his eyes and looked at the knife-blade in his hand. An image had formed there: a reflection of the Gohou Douji 's field of vision. An airplane-like view of towns and rice paddies blurred across a portion of the blade.

"South-east? But there's nothing... Hmn?"

Takaya blinked. The Gohou Douji was descending. Reflected there was...a tomb? Whose tomb? It had been destroyed, but, by whose hand?

"Tsutsui Junkei ..." Takaya murmured. "That's Tsutsui Junkei's tomb . It's been smashed apart. ...Where is that?"

Naoe quickly searched a map. "Directly south of here. Near Hirahata Station . Is that where Nagi-san is?"

"No, she's..." Takaya started to say, but ended with an "Ah!" She was standing behind the tomb. And around her were—fireballs!

(It's Nagi...!)

The Nagi within the blade turned towards him. There was an odd glint in her eyes. No question about it—she had noticed him. At that moment...!



*Fwoosh!*

Something that looked like gold fire gushed out of her mouth.

"!"

Pure white light exploded from the blade. Takaya cried out and covered his eyes.

"Kagetora-sama!"

Startled, Naoe and Chiaki shielded Takaya. Takaya lifted his head. He'd turned away just in time to save his eyes from getting scorched. His lips curved into a dangerous smile.

"I've got you now, you '[Hiragumo](#)' bastard. So you've gone to vent your bitterness at [Tsutsui Junkei's tomb](#) . Yeah, like you're gonna get any revenge on a guy's who's already been purified."

"Kagetora-sama—..."

"The Oda weren't around. Looks like the 'Hiragumo' got away from them, too. We should be able to catch that monster now. Let's get moving."

"Yes."

"Yeah, yeah," Chiaki agreed, and added, grumbling, "Now you take control. Lead if you're gonna lead, but hurry up and remember everything already, 'cause this is a pain in the ass."

Takaya stopped, tight-lipped with annoyance.

"What? You got a problem?"

"Not at aaaall," Chiaki drawled, and climbed into the car. Takaya looked cross again, but took the passenger seat at Naoe's urgent request.

"What? All the <<nue >> have caught by that monster?"

Narimasa only clicked his tongue in disgust when he heard the report. The nue he had sent after the 'Hiragumo' had all been sucked dry of their spiritual powers.

Sassa Narimasa had set up camp with the rest of those Oda troops he led near Houryuu Temple while awaiting information. His <<nue >> were on alert, but those essential few he had sent after the 'Hiragumo' had become its victims.

"You damned monster..."

Rage twisted Narimasa's indomitable features. Someone spoke behind him.

"The truth of Hisahide's secret weapon pales not to its rumor. We must not look upon it lightly."

A short, white-haired old man with a bent back stepped out from the shade of a pine tree. But the voice coming from the old man's mouth belonged to the spirit who had possessed him. Narimasa's face smoothed over.

"... Akanue, is it?"

"It doth appear, Sassa-dono, that thou art having a hard time of it."

"Has Ranmaru-dono ordered you to come keep an eye on me?"

"Fie, Sassa-dono," the Oda spirit called Akanue denied, pushing through the wet grass to Narimasa's side. "I have merely heard report of the unwanted attention of Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) , so have come to lend thee a hand."

"I have no need of your help. Go back and tell this to Mori-dono: I will take responsibility for the '[Hiragumo](#) '. I'll take care of things here on my own."

"That I cannot." A thin smile appeared on Akanue's long, narrow, deeply-wrinkled face. "No difference wouldst make to thee if I take the measure of [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) 's '[Hiragumo](#) ' "

here. We must destroy such a dangerous weapon without fail, Sassa-dono.

Our best advantage lies not with Hisahide retaining this power."

With a hand against his chin, Narimasa looked back at Akanue. His ferocious eyes glinted coldly.

"This is about Akechi Mitsuhide ?"

"..."

Akanue nodded silently. All expression vanished from Narimasa's face.

The stagnant hatred in his heart began to rise to the surface.

"I have heard talk of it."

That there were suspicions of Matsunaga Hisahide forming an alliance with Akechi Mitsuhide , who had been resurrected near the old capital.

Akechi Mitsuhide .

The instigator, as history well knew, of the events at Honnou Temple that resulted in Oda Nobunaga 's death.

Akechi Mitsuhide , who had led an insurrection at Honnou Temple in Kyoto with the war cry 'Our enemy is Honnou Temple '

and taken his master Nobunaga's life even as he had been within sight of unification of the country. He had been defeated by Hashiba

Hideyoshi (later Toyotomi Hideyoshi ) immediately after at the Battle of Yamazaki , then killed at Ogurusu on his way back to his stronghold at Sakamoto .

Nobunaga's death—

Narimasa had been at [Uozu Castle](#) that nightmarish night. The next day he would take the castle in a

violent offensive, ending a three-month siege of the Uesugi stronghold in [Ecchuu](#) .

But the news of the death of their master turned the momentum of the Oda forces on itself. Even now Narimasa still recalled the shock and anguish of that time.

He had given his life and gambled his entire existence on [Oda Nobunaga](#) , his one and only master, and Nobunaga's dream of 'the country united under military rule'. Mitsuhide had stolen, along with Nobunaga's life, Narimasa's hope of living with him in that dreamed-of country.

And now Mitsuhide was leading the [onryou](#) of the provinces around the old capital in an anti-Nobunaga campaign.

Narimasa, his gaze fixed on midair, clenched his fists.

(Damn you, Mitsuhide. Have you gone so far as to resurrect yourself into this world in order defy Lord Nobunaga...?!)

"Sassa-dono, 'twould be a grave threat indeed for the '[Hiragumo](#) ' to fall into Akechi's hands. Even now do spirits filled with hatred for Lord Nobunaga gather in secret near the old capital. If the might of those from [Mt. Hiei](#) and [Iga](#) are combined with that of Mitsuhide, passing onto them a power such as this could only bode ill for us..."

"I understand that perfectly well," Narimasa cut him off sharply. "Since the defenseless <<[nue](#)>> cannot deal with you, cursed '[Hiragumo](#) ', I will

destroy you with my own hands. You won't be able to exploit the powers of a [kanshousha](#) clad in the armor of his body. Damn you, [Matsunaga Hisahide](#), [Akechi Mitsuhide](#). I will wipe the both of you from the face of the earth before Lord Nobunaga awakens!"

Naoe drove due south in pursuit of Nagi. In the backseat, Chiaki leaned forward to ask Takaya, "How's Nagi doing?"

"She's on the move. I've sent the [Gohou Douji](#) after her."

"She is probably heading towards Hisahide," Naoe guessed, hands steady on the wheel. Takaya concentrated on the reflection of the [Gohou Douji](#) 's field of vision within the dagger-blade.

Chiaki commented as he opened a map, "I guess that monster's consciousness is somehow tied to Hisahide's."

"What?" Takaya lifted his head and looked over his shoulder at Chiaki. "What do you mean?"

"Nagi heard the Dragon God speak to her when she got possessed. He said

that he would protect her. That's what she told me, anyway. She believes that I'm his servant."

"Dragon God? You don't mean that it's..."

"Probably [Matsunaga Hisahide](#). Nagi prayed at [Mt. Shigi](#). I don't know if she prayed for a curse on her stepfather or what, but I think her hate and Hisahide's grudge melded together."



Naoe interjected, "So what she believed to be the Dragon God of Mt. Shigi was actually Matsunaga Hisahide ? Her intense emotions awoke him, and he invaded Nagi-san's body with the 'Hiragumo ', which could be called a part of himself... Which means her hatred was

strong enough to fuse with Hisahide's grudge? But did she really hate her stepfather so much?"

"She probably did..."

Takaya's expression was grim. Their childhood experiences and family circumstances were similar enough that he understood her feelings painfully well.

"Her mother was her only friend. She wanted to protect her mother more than anything. I mean, even you—" this he directed at Naoe in the driver's seat— "if you had only one person in the world and that person committed suicide, wouldn't you naturally hate the person who drove her to it? You'd hold a grudge against them too, wouldn't you?"

Naoe glanced at Takaya, but remained silent. Silence was the only answer he could give to that question from Takaya's lips—but yes, he did understand now, very well indeed.

"But I would never let that person commit suicide in the first place."

Chiaki sighed in exasperation and poked the back of Naoe's head.

"Idiot. That was just a 'what if'. I know you. You'd perform <<choubuku >> on anything that moved before you'd let that happen, right?"

"Huh? Really...?" Takaya asked, surprised. "So you're actually the type that flies off the handle, huh?"

"..."

Naoe was silent again, a tangled mass of emotions warring for expression on his face. Chiaki gave a long whistle as he turned away. He commented dramatically, "Well, it's certainly true that for a certain someone, he'd totally lose all distinction."

"???"

Naoe interrupted in consternation, "Never mind that. Kage-tora-sama, how is the [Gohou Douji](#) ? Please do not take your eyes off Nagi-san."

"Eh...? Ah, right."

Takaya fixed his eyes again on the dagger.

Chiaki looked out the window. The goldfish ponds dotting the rural landscape glowed with the light of the morning sun.

"Hmm?"

For a moment he had caught a glance of something odd moving parallel to the car. Chiaki blinked and pressed his face against the window.

"What the?!"

Takaya turned at Chiaki's shout.

"What...? Gah!"

It was a fireball, skimming through the air beside them as if it were racing alongside the car. The single fireball became two, then ten, and in the blink of an eye had coiled around the car like a glowing fog.

"Naoe!"

"Right!"

Naoe stepped on the gas. The Presia picked up speed in an attempt to shake them off, but the fireballs refused to release their hold.

"That's the hoihoi fire?!"

"Naoe! We're surrounded!"

"...!"

Naoe cut the wheel sharply, swinging them back and forth across the road, but still could not manage to get them free.

Chiaki leaned towards the window and made a valiant attack with <<nenpa >>, but the fireballs that were torn apart and scattered quickly regained their original shape.

"Nagahide! They're onryou clad in fire!"

"<<Choubuku >>, then?!"

The swarm of fireballs had now completely covered the car, blocking their view of the road.

Takaya yelled, "Naoe, stop! We'll settle this once and for all!"

Naoe didn't fancy dealing with the rental agency over a fireball-scorched car, either. He slammed on the brakes. Takaya and Chiaki let loose with <<nenpa >>, and the cloud of fireballs danced into the air. They tumbled out of the car.

"This is the Mt. Ryuuou hoihoi fire? Why's it attacking us?"

"Hisahide must be commanding it to do so. He appears to have gained control of the hoihoi fire—and even Toichi 's <<nue >>."

"So he's trying to stop us from going after the 'Hiragumo .' Asshole!" Takaya's eyes lifted. "Let's stop standing around and start putting these things away."

Next to him, Chiaki grinned. "Ooooh, yeah. That's what it's all about."

The swarm of hoihoi fire, now dense as smog, bared their flaming, blood-thirsting faces. *Whoosh!* A hot wind howled and whirled around them.

The hoihoi fire was attacking!

Takaya, Naoe, and Chiaki formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten .

"bai!"

The onryou froze in place.

"Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka !"

As he chanted the mantra of their guardian deity, Takaya shouted, "Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten ! For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

Power gathered in his fist as silver plasmatic light raced through their bodies. The onryou struggling desperately to attack could not break out of

the paralysis

holding them in place. Their gasping screams throbbed in the air like thunder.

And the energy concentrated in their clenched hands exploded across their entire field of vision...!

Takaya roared at the nue —

"<<Choubuku >>!"

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**footnotes**

[1] ~7.9 inches

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## Chapter 8: The Demon's Funeral Fire

When Nagi abruptly regained consciousness, she was sitting on the bank of a small pond in a park-like area.

*Eh?* She looked around dazedly. The 'pond' actually appeared to be the moat of some castle. Nagi looked down at herself. She was barefoot and still in pajamas, now mud-splattered.

"Ah..."

Her mind finally cleared. Why was she here? How had she gotten here? When? She should be in bed in her own room. Why had she woken up in this place? Why...?

(Was I sleep-walking?)

Increasingly afraid, she instinctively hugged herself.

(What...happened to me?!)

She looked around. A towering stone wall encircled the moat, and morning mist enveloped the park and what looked like the ruins of a castle. She could hear the faraway clanging of an electric train, but no other signs of life. And—then.

"...!"

Nagi spun reflexively at a rustling behind her.

"Is—is someone there?"

There was the sound of feet treading over grass. Nagi tensed in fear. A figure appeared—and she screamed the moment she saw it clearly.

"Aaaah...!"

The figure had resolved itself not into a person, but into a blood-covered warrior in crumbling helm and armor. It was a <<nue >> of the Oda, sent to hunt her down—and now, at last, hunt her down it had. The warrior was not alone. It howled the moment it saw her, and its comrades answered in kind nearby. Ghostly warriors began gathering around her, one after another, all of them with hideous battle wounds that had left their bodies mangled and torn.

Nagi was so terrified that she had lost even her ability to scream. Her body was as paralyzed as her voice.

The warriors unsheathed their swords as they approached. No doubt they intended to kill Nagi while her consciousness, not the 'Hiragumo' 's, was in control.

"N-no..." Nagi stammered, trembling so hard her teeth clattered. Tears slid down her cheeks. "Don't...!"

And the warriors brandished their swords and attacked...!

"Aaaaah...!"

Nagi and the spirit warriors screamed simultaneously. Something ripped through their ghostly bodies, out of which a dark smoke gushed, to be

instantly sucked into Nagi's body.

"Aaah...eeeeek...!"

A strange discomfort filled her. The warriors crumbled in place as their bodies broke apart and evaporated into the air. The black smoke, the stolen spiritual power of the warriors, spread into Nagi's every pore.

"Wh...!"

The power filled her to her fingertips, completing her in a way she had never known before. The sensation bewildered and frightened her.

(What in the world is happening to me?!)

The warriors' gaze on her was different now, tinged with obvious fear.

<<She destroyed our brothers...>>

<<She is our enemy...!>>

<<Kill!>>

Nagi cried out in terror. "No! I didn't do anything...!"

Unheeding of her pleas, the warriors drew their swords.

<<She cannot be allowed to live!>>

<<Kill her!>>

They raised their swords. Nagi screamed. But then a voice—!



"Sheathe your swords."

The low, hoarse command had come from behind the warriors. Staring in surprise in the direction of the voice, she saw a short hunchbacked man appear out of the mist.

"This monster cannot be killed at the hand of any <<nue >>. If you should attack carelessly, your power will only be stolen away like that of your brethren."

The ghostly warriors shuddered and retreated. Nagi shivered in overwhelming terror. The old man turned dull leaden eyes towards her and said, his voice the raven's harsh croak, "Art thou afraid? How strange. For 'tis we who are very much afraid of thee."

"Who are you...?" Nagi gathered up her courage to ask. "What...is happening...? What did I..."

"You must die," another voice said from behind the old man. Nagi's eyes opened wide as a sun-tanned young man with a dauntless face appeared —[Sassa Narimasa](#) . The <<nue >> he had sent from [Nara](#) had put everything into the search for Nagi, finding her a step ahead of Takaya, Naoe, and Chiaki. Looking at the trembling Nagi, Narimasa added, his voice calm with the conviction of victory, "You seem to know nothing. Well, no matter. You will soon be dead in any case. If you must hate anyone for it, then hate the monster living inside you: the '[Hiragumo](#) ', and the one who invaded you with the parasite in the first place, [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) ."

"Matsunaga...Hisa...hide...?"

"Your body is no longer yours alone. You are sharing it with the 'Hiragumo' .  
It's unfortunate, but further struggle is meaningless. Once you become a host to it, it cannot be extracted. The monster living inside your body is dangerous to us in the extreme. We will destroy it here along with your body."

"Who are you? Who are you people?!" Nagi shouted, forgetting her fear.

"You were the ones who attacked me, weren't you?! What are you...!"

Narimasa stopped Akanue as he opened his mouth to speak and replied composedly, "I am Sassa Narimasa , vassal of Sengoku general Oda Nobunaga . I came in response to the resurrection of the onshou Matsunaga Danjou Hisahide at Mt. Shigi ."

"O-Oda Nobunaga ..."

Nagi repeated, stunned. Even she recognized that most famous of names.

But what did he mean by being Nobunaga's vassal? And Matsunaga Hisahide —wasn't that the name of the Mt. Shigi general who had governed this area during the Sengoku ?

What was this man saying...?!

What had she stepped into?!

"The parasite living inside thy body is Matsunaga Hisahide 's secret weapon, a terrifying monster that devours the power of the onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>. We cannot simply let it be. Forgive me!"

"...!"

Narimasa unsheathed his katana. Nagi backed away. The young man appeared to be quite serious. She didn't understand anything but the fact that he was going to kill her. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to die...!

*"I will protect thee."*

The Dragon God's promise echoed back to her. Nagi desperately threw out a silent cry for help.

(Save me...! O Dragon God!)

She screamed with all her might, "Save me! Chiaki-san!"

"!"

Chiaki turned as he was about to step into the car. He had felt a strong <<mind-call >> from the north.

(It's Nagi...!)

Naoe and Takaya stopped and looked at him. They had exterminated Hisahide's hoihoi fire and had been about to pick up the trail once more. Chiaki told them, "I heard a cry from Nagi. Kagetora, where is the Gohou Douji ?"

Takaya looked at the dagger and blanched at the scene reflected there.

(Oh shit...!)

He shouldn't have taken his eyes off of it. Nagi was surrounded by <<nue >>. Oda's...?!

They were out of time!

Takaya said in a tight voice, "Nagi's been found by the Oda. Chiaki, synchronize with my 'eyes' and navigate. I'll relay what the Gohou Douji is seeing."

"Kagetora, what are you...?"

"I'm going to synchronize with the Gohou Douji 's 'body'. I'll have him protect Nagi until we arrive. Naoe, step on it. Head due north. You're racing against time! Don't stop for any reason!"

"Understood!" Naoe released the hand break even as he responded, without pausing to check if Takaya and Chiaki were fully in the car. The car shot forward before the doors could close completely. On the back seat, Takaya chanted to the dagger, then bit his finger and held it over the blade. He said to the Gohou Douji as drops of his blood fell onto it, "Bestow upon me the 'spirit' of the Dharma of the Sword!"

The blood instantly dissolved into the blade, and Takaya's consciousness melded with that of the Gohou Douji . Chiaki caught Takaya's tilting body against his side, also chanting: "Naubou bagyabatei ushunishaya on roro soboro jinbara chishuta shidda roshani sarabaarata sadaniei sowaka —...

Sensation stirred within his soul. His vision mingled and fused with Takaya's. This was spirit-energy synchronization, a unique technique which could only be invoked between those with especially high spiritual powers; Kagetora and Nagahide were the only Yasha-shuu

capable of this difficult feat. Chiaki opened his eyes. The Gohou Douji 's vision, relayed by Takaya, imposed itself over Chiaki's visual perception. He expanded the reach of his spirit sensing antenna in a wide circle to pinpoint the Gohou Douji 's location.

"Anything, Nagahide?"

"Not far. North. We're close—it's around Kooriyama... Hmn?"

The scene the Gohou Douji looked upon was familiar. There was a moat. Castle ruins perhaps, with railroad tracks close by... It was...

"I got it, Naoe! That's Kooriyama Castle !"

"What?!"

"I'm sure of it! That's where Nagi is!"

"Kooriyama Castle !"

Naoe twisted the wheel sharply. The Presia accelerated wildly towards Yamato-Kooriyama on a seldom-used road.

"Ugh...!" Narimasa grunted, halting in his tracks with naked sword in hand.

"!"

Nagi gasped in surprise. Akanue and the other nue also sucked in amazed breaths. Just as Narimasa had been about to cut Nagi down—

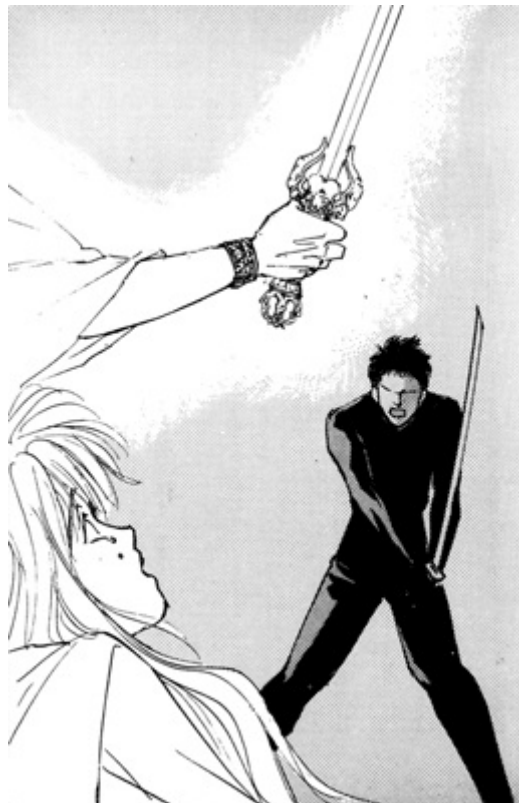
The golden Douji, bearer of a thousand swords, suddenly whirled down into the space between them.

"Wh-what is that...!"

"Narimasa-dono! That's...!"

The [Gohou Douji](#) of the Sword stood protectively in front of Nagi, blocking Narimasa's way.

(This is...the Dragon God?) Nagi thought, stunned and bewildered.



"Narimasa-dono!" Akanue called sharply, "'tis a [Gohou Douji](#) being controlled by the Uesugi—[Gohou Douji](#) of the Sword, servant of [Bishamonten](#) !"

"What? Uesugi?!"

Narimasa confronted the [Gohou Douji](#) , glaring. The synchronization of his spiritual energy with that of the [Gohou Douji](#) allowed Takaya to move the [Gohou Douji](#) according to his will. The [Yasha-shuu](#) , who served [Uesugi](#)

Kenshin , God of War, could also be called servants to the heavenly deities.

Through Kagetora's own spiritual power and the divine power of <<choubuku >> granted to him by Bishamonten , he was able to synchronize his spiritual energy with others who served him.

"Damn you, I won't let you interfere...!"

Narimasa attacked the Gohou Douji with <<nenpa >>. The plasmatic bolt met the golden film that covered the Douji's body and scattered.

"You...!"

His attack frustrated, Narimasa hesitated. With a graceful swish, the Gohou Douji 's swords fanned across his back like the feathers of a peacock's tail.

Several hundred swords shot towards Narimasa and the nue !

"Ugh!"

Anger warped Narimasa's face at last as he erected a <<goshinha >> to protect himself against the cloud of swords flying towards him.

"You impudent...!" Narimasa roared. Spiritual energy erupted from his body—and a violent battle began between the two combatants!

Nagi stared speechlessly at the unbelievable scene in front of her. What was this? What was happening here? What...

<<Nagi...>>

Nagi started and lifted her head. Someone was calling her, and the voice seemed to be speaking directly into her mind.

Who...?

<<I will protect you, Nagi.>>

A man's voice she had heard somewhere before.

<<These people are your enemies. Our enemies. They will hurt you. They will hurt us.>>

Enemies—

People who wanted to kill her. Enemies. Those who had hurt her, rejected her. She suddenly saw them again: her relatives, people who had treated her and her mother like insects to be crushed underfoot. Her stepfather, who had married her mother only to use her, and then driven her to suicide.

<<I am the only who will protect you, Nagi!>>

This voice... Yes, this voice belonged to—

The Dragon God!

The terrible <<power>> of the two combatants crashed into each other, creating a squall that mowed down the surrounding trees. The air between them exploded with plasmatic light!

"!"



A car screeched to a halt nearby. Naoe and Chiaki alighted and immediately came flying into the battle between the Gohou Douji and Narimasa.

"Over here...!" Chiaki shot a <<nenpa >> at Narimasa. Narimasa could not bring up his defenses in time against the sudden attack, and was flung back.

"Narimasa-dono!"

Akanue and the other nue leapt into an attack against Naoe and Chiaki as soon as they saw the Yasha-shuu reinforcements.

"Ugh...!"

Naoe encircled himself and Chiaki with a <<goshinha >>, intercepting the oncoming <<nenpa >> with sharp explosions of light.

"Damn you...!" Narimasa climbed to his feet, blood running into one fiercely glaring eye.

At that moment they heard an eerie sound coming from behind them.

*Creak creak...*

"What the!"

They spun. Cracks darted through the tall stone wall in the blink of an eye.

The wall crumbled with a terrifying *boom*. Naoe and Chiaki reflexively leapt nearly five meters back to either side, but the <<nue >> were on them in a flash.

"...!"

The wreckage of the wall shot out in all directions like a storm of bullets. Naoe and Chiaki strengthened their <<goshinha >> shields, but it was all they could do to protect themselves against the fierce attack. The Gohou Douji , in synchrony with Takaya, commenced another strike against Narimasa.

His golden swords shot forth, but were completely brushed aside by Narimasa's <<goshinha >>.

"!"

Naoe whirled. He had gotten separated from Takaya, whose body lay defenseless while he controlled the Gohou Douji .

(Dammit...!)

Akanue was certainly aware of that fact. "There!" He shouted, blasting a <<nenpa >> charged with all his power at the car where they had left Takaya. "'Vreen'"—Naoe encircled him with a <<goshinha >>.

"Ugh!"

A terrible flash of plasmatic light scattering in all directions.

"Asshole!" Chiaki yelled as he mowed down the <<nue >>.

They screamed as they were tossed aside, but instantly recovered, brandishing their swords. Chiaki spat in disgust and formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten .

"Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

He attacked the swarm of <<nue >>.

"bai!"

The **onryou** disappeared with a sharp crack of air. Turning, Chiaki shouted "Naoe! Kagetora, withdraw! We're too thinly spread!"

Naoe shouted towards the **Gohou Douji** , "Kagetora-sama! Please go back! Hurry!"

Narimasa's fierce attack had strained the synchronization between Takaya and the **Gohou Douji** . He was being pressed back. If he slipped and any part of the **Gohou Douji** were injured, then Kagetora himself would be injured through their bond.

"Kagetora-sama! Hurry...!"

Narimasa shot a <<**nenpa** >> at the **Gohou Douji** . Naoe barely managed to block it with his <<**goshinha** >>. Akanue attacked Takaya at the same time, to be deflected by Chiaki's shield.

The **Gohou Douji** shot up into the sky. His body suddenly became transparent, and

Narimasa's attack went right through him. Naoe dashed towards Takaya, who finally opened his eyes in the back seat as he disengaged from the synchronization. He quickly shook his head several times, then finally looked at Naoe beside him.

"Naoe! What happened to Nagi?!"

"Nagi-san? ...!"

Turning, Naoe and Takaya—and, even Chiaki, Narimasa, and the **nue** paused their various battles as they gaped.

(Wh...!)

Nagi stood with the stone wall at her back. Eerie orange flames danced around her, and her eyes glowed with a strange light. Her aura...was full of an unearthly evil...!

*Vreesh.*

There was a sound as of something being warped. Then the bodies of the Oda ghost-warriors suddenly wavered in place and were pulled towards Nagi.

"Ah!"

Everyone cried out in one voice. Another shape was superimposed over Nagi's: a large tea kettle wearing a human face. A monster tea kettle with human limbs.

(So that's the "[Hiragumo](#)"...?!) Takaya thought as Oda's <<[nue](#)>> were sucked into the tea kettle's mouth. The other <<[nue](#)>> were also being forcibly dragged towards the '[Hiragumo](#)'. Their struggles were useless against its terrifying power.

"Wauuugh...!" Akanue screamed. The '[Hiragumo](#)'s enormous power was pulling Akanue out of his spiritual vessel.

"Akanue! You impudent...!" Narimasa shouted, launching an attack against the '[Hiragumo](#)', but it simply absorbed his <<[nenpa](#)>>. Akanue's darkish spirit was losing his grip on his body even as he clung to it with frantic desperation.

"Ugh...!"

Meanwhile, Takaya, Naoe, and Chiaki were experiencing crisis of their own. They could feel the power bleeding out of them. The 'Hiragumo' had finally developed the ability to wring spiritual energy out of kanshousha !

"Aaaaah...!"

It was stealing their power from them—from Takaya, from Naoe, from Chiaki, from Narimasa. One by one, they fell to their knees as exhaustion abruptly assaulted them. They couldn't resist this terrible leeching of their <<power>>. If this continued, they would die. The 'Hiragumo' had begun to feed on all 'energy', including their life forces!

"I will stop this!"

Mustering his will, Narimasa raised his sword. Chiaki's eyes widened.

(No...!)

If he couldn't use <<power>>, then he would kill Nagi with his own two hands.

If its body died, the 'Hiragumo' would lose its abilities...!

Narimasa attacked Nagi with a roar. Chiaki immediately sprang in front of him.

"Get away from her!"

Blade clanged violently against blade as Chiaki's dagger blocked Narimasa's katana at close quarters.

"Damn you...! Do intend to interfere still?"

"I'm not gonna let you kill Nagi!" Pushing against the hilt of Narimasa's long sword with all his might, Chiaki shouted, "Nagi! Wake up! Nagi!"

She only gazed fixedly at him, clad in orange flames.

"Are you gonna let yourself be taken over by him, Nagi?! Dammit, wake up Nagi! Nagi!"

Nagi!

Nagi's shoulders quivered. The unearthly power filling her eyes gave way to her own light.

"Chiaki-san...?"

*Clang*—pushing against Narimasa's katana with all his strength, Chiaki yelled, "Nagi! That thing within you is not the Dragon God! It's just a monster! A monster being controlled by a ghost!"

<<He's your enemy, Nagi...!>>

Another voice resounded within her mind: the angry voice of the Dragon God rebuking her.

<<He is our enemy! Do not listen to him! He is deceiving you...!>>

Nagi pressed a hand against her head in confusion. Chiaki shouted vehemently, "That thing is not the Dragon God, Nagi!"

Narimasa attacked Chiaki.

"If you insist on standing in my way, then I will send you to your death...!"

"!"

Chiaki dodged the downward-swinging sword at the last second. Narimasa swung again. *Ah*, Nagi gasped. Takaya dashed forward and threw himself at Narimasa. They tumbled grappling to the ground.

<<Kill them!>> the Dragon God commanded Nagi. A sharp voice that brooked no refusal.

<<Kill them all!>>

"He is not the Dragon God, Nagi!" Chiaki refuted the voice.

<</I am the one who will protect you...!>>

Nagi cowered, arms around her head. She was no longer sure of anything. Her head was about to explode.

"Stop it...!"

"Nagi!"

In the next instant the '[Hiragumo](#)' began drawing in everything with terrifying power.

Noooo—!

Unable to resist the implosive inhalation, Akanue was torn out of his spiritual vessel with only a single short scream.

"Akanue!"

There was no way of stopping it. Akanue abruptly disappeared into the 'Hiragumo 's jaws.

Every type of energy spiraled towards the 'Hiragumo '.

Takaya and the others shielded themselves and tried to resist, but even their physical strength was drained by the tremendous force. Their <<power>> was being stolen from them!

"Aah...aaaaah...!" Chiaki groaned as energy gushed out of his body. He felt as if his muscles were rapidly weakening, withering. Takaya collapsed to the ground. Naoe reached for him desperately, calling his name. He touched Takaya, but could move no further. His body lost all strength, and he, too, crumbled to the ground, hand still outstretched.

(This...can't be...happening...!) Takaya clawed at the ground in desperate defiance. (Namu...Tobatsu...Bishamon...)

Even his soul was being wrenched out of him. Takaya finally lost consciousness.

But then—

Some tremendous power jerked his consciousness back.

(Wh...?)

The pull on his energy suddenly slackened. No, had been partially cut off. He realized then that a golden light encircled the three of them. They looked up.



The Gohou Douji had cast a <<goshinkou >> around them.

"It's...!"

Oddly enough, even the awesome force of the 'Hiragumo 's draining power had no effect on the Gohou Douji .

It hovered in midair, completely unaffected, protecting Takaya and the others. Naoe inhaled a quick breath and turned to the astonished Takaya. That was it! Of course!

"Kagetora-sama, the Gohou Douji !"

"Huh?"

"Look. The Gohou Douji , which has no corporeal body, is unperturbed by even the 'Hiragumo 's draining power. Neither is this <<goshinkou >> being pulled away. What do you know what this means?"

"What it means...?"

Naoe said urgently, "It means that the powers of the Gohou Douji —as well as that of the heavenly deities and their servants—cannot be stolen by the 'Hiragumo '. My guess is that their origins lie in dimensions that are too far apart, and if the 'Hiragumo '

should carelessly take in such power, its capacity would be exceeded.

No matter how far it's grown, a phantom cannot handle divine powers within its worldly limitations. If it exceeds its capacity, the 'Hiragumo ' will implode and self-destruct!"

"Divine power..." Takaya said, enlightened. "I got it!"

Nagi cried out. There was no way for her to control the power of the

'Hiragumo '.

"Noooooo... Stop...!"

"Nagi!" Chiaki shouted desperately, his voice hoarse. "Hold on! Don't lose yourself! Nagi!"

"Nooooooo! Help me—!"

The voice of the Dragon God reverberated in her head. <<Kill them! Kill them all!>>

Nagi covered her head, sobbing, "Help me, help me...!"

"Nagi!" He desperately reached out to her.

"Chiaki-san!"

Takaya formed Bishamonten 's symbolic gesture. In the glowing <<goshinkou >>-shielded eye of a wildly raging storm, Takaya chanted loudly, "On beishiramandaya sowaka , on beishiramandaya sowaka —..."

Power gathered within his hands.

"On beishiramandaya sowaka !"

His eyes opened wide, and he thundered, "Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten ! For this demon subjugation, confer thy demon-vanquishing sword upon me!"

A plasmatic bolt of silver light crashed through the center of the storm.

"I"

Nagi was flung back. Naoe and Chiaki shielded themselves, leaning into the gale. An intense white light coalesced in Takaya's hands. His palms burned for a moment before the mass of light solidified into steel, and a magnificent sword glowed in his grip.



The [Sword of Bishamonten](#) had taken shape in the earthly realm.

Their <<[choubuku](#)>> ability was a divine power bestowed upon them by [Bishamonten](#) , the God of War. His Sword was created from the same power and could also be called a mass of <<[choubuku](#)>> energy. And if the '[Hiragumo](#) ' could not drain divine power, then...!

"Eat this...!"

Takaya sprinted forward, swinging the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) . The '[Hiragumo](#) 's kettle shape with its terrible power was superimposed over Nagi's body.

Takaya leveled the Sword and thrust it straight into the 'Hiragumo 's maws!

"Go blow yourself up!"

The blade disappeared into the 'Hiragumo 's mouth with a flash of blue light

<<...!>>

Bishamonten 's power unfolded within the tea kettle.

And the 'Hiragumo '

swallowed it down. Its tea kettle body immediately swelled, its capacity exceeded. Light flared from the sharp cracks spreading through its body.

!

Then it exploded in all directions!

Takaya and the others shielded themselves. The 'Hiragumo ' self-destructed with an ear-splitting denotation.

(Did that work...?!)

The pieces of the tea kettle turned to silver, then a sparkling rain that enveloped them in every color of the rainbow. It had tried to devour so much power that its body had instantly inflated like a balloon and imploded.

Takaya lifted his head. The pieces of the 'Hiragumo ' continued to fall like a glistening downpour of light against the

morning sun. But at the touch of the earth they turned to ash and disappeared.

The storm calmed. That terrifying draining power and everything else had vanished as if they had never been.

The gluttonous tea kettle monster had been destroyed by its own gorging on [Bishamonten](#) 's power...

"Nagi!"

Nagi, who had regained her own form, had collapsed into Takaya's arms, unconsciousness.

She had at last been released from the '[Hiragumo](#) 's hold. Though exhausted, she appeared to be uninjured. So in the end they had managed to resolve the problem of the '[Hiragumo](#) ' without hurting Nagi. Chiaki rushed up to them, and Takaya passed her over.

[Sassa Narimasa](#) climbed shakily to his feet. Naoe stood protectively beside Takaya. Takaya pinned a stony stare on Narimasa.

"So you're [Sassa Narimasa](#) ?"

"I have heard of the Uesugi's <<[choubuku](#) >>

power, but it is far and away more terrible than the rumors..."

Narimasa commented, panting. "That it could destroy the '[Hiragumo](#) ' with such ease... Still, well and good. What you have done will one day pave for us the way to ascendancy."

"What are you talking about?"

"..."

Narimasa considered, smirking. "So you...don't know yet. Ah, I see."

Takaya glowered at him threateningly. Narimasa wiped his mouth and added, "I thought that you destroyed the 'Hiragumo', knowing. Hmn. In that case, I will tell you this as a token of my appreciation.

"What?!"

Narimasa's eyes hardened, the unyielding spirit of a ferocious warrior surfacing from their depths.

"The 'Hiragumo' 's master, Matsunaga Hisahide, has allied himself with Akechi Mitsuhide, our bitter enemy, and has declared war against Oda...!"

"!"

Takaya, Chiaki, and Naoe stared at Narimasa. "Akechi Mitsuhide ?!"

"Has he been resurrected, too?! That's...!"

Narimasa replied, his voice hard as steel, "Our battle against the anti-Oda forces in the provinces around the old capital will only intensify from this point...and the impact of the destruction of Hisahide's secret weapon on that battle will be great. So for now I will say my thanks to you, Yasha-shuu of the Uesugi."

The resurrection of Akechi Mitsuhide —

Completely blind-sided by this news, for a moment none of them could make a reply.

"Don't think that we'll let it end here, Narimasa," Takaya retorted after a moment, eyes glinting. "D'you really think we're gonna let the <<Yami-Sengoku >> onshou run wild under our noses?"

"Are you planning to challenge me here?" Narimasa smiled, lifting razor-sharp eyes. "Though it appears as if we're not going have the time for that."

"Eh...?"

He turned, following Narimasa's gaze, and gasped at the unbelievable sight. An enormous cloud of fireballs flew towards them from the distant eastern sky, making the eerie *janjan* sounds that gave them their other name.

(Hoihoi fire...!)

"Cursed Hisahide. He has incited Toichi 's <<nue >> in revenge. What now, Uesugi? Will you fight me? Or would you be toasted by Hisahide's fireballs before that?"

Takaya spat in disgust, glaring at the incoming hoihoi fire. "We'll put off settling with you. Let's take care of the hoihoi fire."

"Kagetora-sama."

"Naoe. You can protect Nagi, right?"

Chiaki rose as if this had been the signal he had been waiting for.

"Time to go wild, huh?"

"Let's ask Mt. Shigi 's Bishamon-san for some help."

Takaya filled himself with power as he spoke, and it circled his body in a whirling dance. Narimasa glowered fiercely up into the sky. Energy flared from Chiaki and Naoe as they awaited the swarm of fireballs—  
—the onslaught of fire-clad <<nue >> against the four warriors!

Takaya raised the Sword of Bishamonten and shouted, "Bring it on, you freakin' nue !"

Burning rocks smashed apart against their <<shield-wall>> in the first furious barrage before Takaya and the others counterattacked—the opening shots of the battle at the ruins of Kooriyama Castle in which the four 'kanshousha ' fought for their lives against the swarm of 'kaki '!

"Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten ! For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

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## Epilogue

The sun was already high overhead in a wide azure summer sky and the traffic moving busily in both directions by the time they escorted Nagi home. The town had come to life in another perfect midsummer day.

They had somehow managed to meet and repel the fireballs' attack. But though Narimasa had made a show of standing with them, he'd taken advantage of the chaos to slip away unnoticed near the end of the battle. When the dust settled, he was already nowhere to be seen.

Naoe parked in front of the house. Nagi, still in her pajamas, climbed out, and the others followed suit.

Nagi looked up at Chiaki and said in a small voice, "You're...going now, aren't you?"

"Yes," Chiaki replied, nodding. "Don't worry, you'll be all right now.

You should hurry up and forget about all the scary things that happened."

"But..."

"Hey hey, come on. Look, your pajamas are all dirty. You should go and change."

"P-please stop changing the subject! I—"

Chiaki grinned nonchalantly. He crouched down and peered into Nagi's face. "You can just think of everything as a bad dream. That way you'll forget all about it in no time," Chiaki interrupted her, smiling blithely. "There won't be any more scary things happening from now on."

"..."

Nagi had not understood anything that had happened. She still knew nothing about they were, what the Dragon God was.

"Chiaki-san," she began resolutely, "you...what in the world are..."

"..."

Straightening, Chiaki answered, "I told you, I'm the servant of the Dragon God. Right?"

That last he directed at the two people standing behind him. Takaya looked away, unamused. Naoe stared silently down at the ground.

"Nagi-san," Naoe spoke after a moment, "there is one final question I would like to ask you. What did you ask [Kuuhachi-san](#) for? What did you wish for in your hundred shrine pilgrimages?"

Nagi's face stiffened. Takaya pulled on Naoe's sleeve warningly. But after a moment of silence, Nagi replied, "I wanted courage."

"What...?"

"So that I will be able to live on even if my mother is no longer here.

Even if there is no one to protect me... That was my wish. My mother

always said that the Dragon God could grant any wish."

"..."

"Because I'm a crybaby, you know. Whenever something happens, I immediately start crying... So I wanted to be braver. I wanted to walk forward before I started crying..."

All of them looked surprised.

"Then..."

"Does that make me strange?" Nagi looked at Chiaki earnestly. "Am I weird? Does wishing for something like that make me weird?"

The three of them gazed at Nagi silently for a moment. Her eyes held no deceit. Chiaki replied approvingly, "That's not weird at all."

"..."

"It's all right, everything's going to be fine. Your wish will definitely come true. The servant of the Dragon God guarantees it."

"Chiaki-san..."

"But of course I knew that. Since we *are* the Dragon God's servants. Don't worry. He's heard your prayers. You're a strong girl, and you'll definitely pull through," Chiaki stated almost as if he were casting a suggestion, and smiled encouragingly. "Right...?"

"..."

At that moment, a black Cedric screeched to a halt in front of the gate. Two men jumped out and came running over, their faces pale.

"M-Miss Nagi!"

It was Shiohara's secretary, Yamamoto, and his driver, Aoki.

"Where did you go?! We were—we were so worried!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"When I heard that you were staying in the house by yourself, I got worried and called early this morning. But no one was here, and the window was open and everything was a mess..."

"That's right, but we're so glad you're all right!"

Aoki hugged Nagi, on the verge of tears. Chiaki, Naoe, and Takaya looked at each other and smiled wryly.

Chiaki laid a hand on Nagi's head.

"See you, Nagi."

"Chiaki-san..."

"I don't think anything else'll happen, but if anything does, call me any time. I'll come flying over wherever I am."

Nagi looked straight at Chiaki. "Really? You'll really come?"



"Yeah, I promise," Chiaki answered, then took a papier mâché tiger out of his pocket and handed it to Nagi.

"He's my standin. Call me any time."

"..."

"Even if you're just lonely, okay?"

Chiaki patted Nagi's head before heading back to the car. Nagi called to his back, "Chiaki-san!"

He turned, and Nagi smiled brightly.

"Thank you!"

Chiaki smiled back at her and waved. They climbed back into the car, and Naoe started the engine. Nagi stood in the garden, watching as the

Presia drove away.

She stood there until the car was out of sight.

"I guess it was just a malicious rumor after all that she cursed her stepfather to death," Naoe murmured from the driver's seat. "I wonder if it's also a lie that she hated Shiohara?"

"Who knows...?" Chiaki commented, and added, "Though she didn't wish for his death, I still think that she did really hate him. If not, then she wouldn't have been possessed by Hisahide's [onryou](#)."

"So Hisahide's hatred melded with Nagi-san's? But things will probably be hard for her now, too."

"She'll be all right," Chiaki replied, sounding mellow and relaxed as he reclined against the seat. "Whatever people say, she'll be all right as long as there are people who care about her that much around. She'll definitely make it through." He added, "She'll be some woman in five years. I guarantee it. I'm looking forward to it."

Naoe sighed in amazement. Takaya, who had listened in silence, spoke from the passenger seat.

"Hisahide didn't show himself at all. I wonder where he is. Shouldn't we deal with him as quickly as we can?"

"That's true. Since he was controlling the '[Hiragumo](#)' remotely, we haven't discovered his true whereabouts, but he's probably somewhere around

here, near the old capital."

"But if he's allied himself with [Akechi Mitsuhide](#) ..."

Chiaki moaned, scowling. "Still, that Mitsuhide's got some nerve, huh?

Won't Nobunaga go tear him to pieces as soon as wakes up?"

"Whatever happens, things are going to get messy." Stepping on the

break in front of a red light, Naoe looked at Takaya sitting beside

him. "I believe the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> will only intensify from here on. Kagekatsu-sama, our leisure has run out."

"..."

Takaya look at Naoe listlessly and turned away.

"... Yeah."

He gazed at the scenery outside the window in absent-minded dejection.

[Sassa Narimasa](#) —

Vassal of [Oda Nobunaga](#) , general of [Ecchu](#) . Four hundred years ago, he had fought against the Uesugi for control of northern [Ecchu](#) and [Echigo](#) . And after Kenshin's death, many violent battles had unfolded between him and Kagekatsu, the next head of the Uesugi.

(Kagekatsu...)

He said it in his mind as he had in his dream. Though no clear impressions yet stirred at the name, still the feelings it roused roiled, oppressive and unbearable, in his chest.

Sorrowful, agonizing...

His younger brother, whom he had fought in the [Otate no Ran](#) .

([Uesugi Kagekatsu](#) —...)

Takaya bit his lip lightly, submerged in silence. Naoe gazed fixedly at him.

Kagetora had, without a doubt, begun to regain his former <<power>> and knowledge. And, perhaps—

*Those* memories as well...

(Kagetora-sama...) he cried in the silence of his mind—and then abruptly noticed, belatedly, why he so naturally thought of Takaya as Kagetora when he was here at his side: Takaya's every act and every word were, all unconsciously, exactly the same as when he had been 'Kagetora'.

Naoe looked at him with fresh eyes. (Can the person he is now endure all that is yet locked within his mind?)

Could he accept the past?

Could he withstand and accept the enormous cruelty of the memories from four hundred years ago?

Or would he break first?

(And yet...) Naoe's thoughts darkened.

When Kagetora regained his memories...



If it meant that he would be banished...

*You alone I shall never forgive for all of eternity*—if it meant that Kageatora would fling those words once again into his face...

(Let him break instead.)

Better that he should break.

Then he would be able to gather those shattered pieces in his arms and never let go. He would hold this person whom no one else could love for eternity.

And even if there were those who loved him, even if there were those he loved...

He would let no one touch him. He would never give him up.

(Not to anyone...)

"Naoe?"

Naoe came back to himself at the sound of Chiaki's voice. The light had changed. He stepped on the gas. The scenery flowed past outside.

"..."

Chiaki stared at Naoe's face in the rearview mirror. He seemed on the verge of saying something, but hesitated and sighed deeply instead.

(It's not really something I can stick my nose into...I guess.)

Chiaki closed his mouth. Right. He had already cut his ties with the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) . He had not changed his mind about that. [Uesugi Kenshin](#) had nothing to do with him. He had not heard that revered voice for decades, and there was no longer any need for blind obedience to duty. He had made the decision to live however he wanted. He had cut himself off from anything to do with the mission and all the rest of it. He could disappear somewhere tomorrow.

(But...)

Chiaki looked at the two sitting in front of him. Naoe and Kagetora...

(Neither of you can let it go, can you...)

Silence settled within the car, its passengers occupied by vastly different emotions. To be interrupted by—

"Aaaaagh—!" Chiaki suddenly shouted. Takaya and Naoe started as the yell flung them out of their thoughts.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what the heck, Chiaki?! Don't scare me like that!"

"Shit! My Leopard's still parked in a freakin' no-parking zone! Hey, Naoe! Hurry up and get back to [Yamato-Koizumi Station](#) ! Come on, step on it!"

"You're still okay, aren't you? You don't have to be that panicked about it."

"Idiot! They'll totally tow my ass and ticket me! I'll be up to my eyebrows in red tape!"

"Oh, right. 'Cause you're driving without a license."

"That's not the problem! What'll I do if they scratch her? You gonna pay me to fix her up?!"

"Humph. That's called 'reaping what you sow.'"

"*What* was that, KageTORAAA?"

"Or maybe karma."

"I'm gonna murder you!"

"Just you try it, No-License."

Chiaki jerked back on Takaya's collar, precipitating an all-out brawl. Naoe headed for [Yamato-Koizumi Station](#), hand pressed against his forehead. The combination of Nagahide and

KageTORA might be the most potent they had, but with these two, multiple meanings of the word probably applied.

"Chiaki, you bastard. Dammit, that's it. I can't take this anymore!"

"That's my line, you ass! We're gonna settle this today, once and for all!"

"Good grief...! If you're going to play around, then please do so outside. Outside...I sa—aaaaagh!"

The escalating battle had engulfed Naoe, causing the car to swerve onto the opposite lane. It in turn forced the driver of an oncoming car to veer wildly to avoid them, finally resulting in his car landing in a rice paddy beside the road.

The Presia continued clamorously down the highway, completely oblivious.

Cicadas chirped in the fields all around them.

The dazzling cerulean sky across the vast open plains foretold of another hot summer day.

END